

WARFUNK diaries

VOLUME 4 | 2026

Exploring the plurality of
experiences and emotional
articulations of war





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WARFUN DIARIES

Edited by Antonio De Lauri

The *WARFUN Diaries* is an open access publication connected to the project "War and Fun: Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience (WARFUN)", funded by the European Research Council and led by Research Professor Antonio De Lauri at the Chr. Michelsen Institute.

WARFUN is a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant project - Grant agreement ID: 101001106

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Fun in War?

ON RESEARCHING FUN AND ENTERTAINMENT IN THE YUGOSLAV PARTISAN STRUGGLE BY IVA JELUŠIĆ

This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.

Commenting on my research for the [WarFun](#) project, someone once remarked that I must be using a very broad definition of fun — one that, apparently, included everything. In a way, they were right. But my usage of the term fun did not come from nowhere. It gradually emerged through engaging with the sources I had at my disposal. Studying fun in the setting of the communist-led People's Liberation Struggle (Narodnooslobodilačka borba, NOB) that developed during the Second World War on the Yugoslav territories inevitably raised a number of conceptual questions. First and foremost, probably like anyone who has not experienced war, I wondered what could possibly be fun for the inhabitants of Yugoslavia who found themselves caught in the vortex of that particular conflict. Primary sources created during the NOB or dedicated to the memory of the NOB offered some clues. That is, they revealed aspects from which the topic of fun in war might be considered, researched, and talked about.

It was not at all encouraging – but, I must admit, it was expected – that the NOB participants very rarely, almost never, used the term fun. However, archival sources, especially various military instructions and directives, abound with synonymous terms. Of course, the term motivation appears, as well as (good) mood and cheerfulness. And singing, dancing, teasing and joking are often mentioned as a means of achieving this desired joyful mood. Memoir literature is a bit more generous on this matter as it is possible to find whole paragraphs – although, unfortunately, rarely more than that – dedicated to actual descriptions of this or that event that comforted, brightened, and cheered up those who were present in these types of sources.

In other words, I had to dig through a wide range of sources, but diaries, memoirs, and anecdotal evidence stood out as materials that enabled me to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of fun among women and men who participated in the NOB. Of course, if these women and men were available in the present, the method of oral history, I am sure, would prove to be an invaluable asset in researching fun during war. From the fragments I more or less stumbled upon reading through hundreds and hundreds of pages of literature, the list of questions I wish I could have asked grew incredibly quickly and I was oh so very envious of my fellow anthropologists who were actually able to talk to war veterans about their own research on fun in war.

In addition, I have found that the finest way to explore fun in written sources about the People's Liberation Struggle is actually to explore entertainment. Notably, in all languages of ex-Yugoslavia words entertainment and fun translate with one and the same term – zabava – and it means pleasant pastime, party (in all its synonyms), social event, or performance with music and dancing. It is a very fitting coincidence for me that cultural life organized as a part of the Yugoslav Partisan resistance during the Second World War – including entertainment activities explicitly designed to be fun – provides a remarkable example of leadership-encouraged and widely accepted activism (and artivism). In accordance, moments of relaxation with music and dance, as well as occasionally, telling stories and playing social games are types of events that the sources

consistently describe in terms that suggest having fun. While such activities often began as an incidental or spontaneous occurrence, Partisan cultural life developed into a strategically cultivated and officially sanctioned means of support and cohesion within a very short time. And while wartime cultural workers tried hard to educate and ideologically direct their Partisan and civilian audiences, they put in equal effort to also distract, amuse, entertain, and, if at all possible, motivate them. With the help of singing, dancing, literature, and, above all, theatre, artistic creation, and propaganda were intertwined with entertainment.

As a historian of women's and gender history, I approached the sources not only in search of officially sanctioned propaganda-cum-entertainment among the Yugoslav Partisans, but also of traces of fun as gendered practice. More visible forms of entertainment within the movement — especially those tied to Partisan cultural production — also reveal how gender shaped access, participation, and the meaning of fun. Women actively participated as organizers, performers, and audience members.



Image: Theater group of the regional People's Liberation Committee for Dalmatia gives a performance for the people and the army (October 1943, Livno, B-H)

In some cases, their involvement in entertainment spaces provided a form of empowerment within the military context as they, many for the first time in their lives, were able to express some of the issues they encountered in their everyday lives and drew attention to the feminist aspect of the communist ideology some among them advocated. Such activism was often intertwined with humor, singing, and sometimes even alcohol. Women, it seems to me, approached the novelties that the war had to offer as women of the period tended to approach everything, by getting down to business. But also by creating opportunities, however small, for joy and fun.

In addition, moments of pastime in pleasure and intimacy were shaped by, and in turn shaped, wartime gender relations. Women's writings about the war, more than men's, hinted at a wealth of such practices, many of which remained private or were only partially recorded. These fragments, sometimes embedded between the lines, suggested that women's experiences of fun were often more ambiguous, more situation dependent, and at times more resistant to dominant narratives than public commemorations or existing secondary literature might suggest.



**Image: Partisan Circle dances
Museum of the 2nd Session of the AVNOJ**

In the end, fun and entertainment also existed within broader wartime gender dynamics, where different forms of social interaction – ranging from the mentioned celebratory performances all the way to forms of coercive practices – influenced both men’s and women’s experiences. The tension between fun and entertainment as uplifting forces and the harsh realities of war, including the exploitation of women, can further complicate the study of cultural life during the conflict. Primary sources indicate – although fairly rarely and often more obliquely than a researcher might hope – that moments of enjoyment could sometimes be intertwined with violence, coercion, and power plays when control was asserted in ways that could seem almost playful but were never harmless. For example, if they do approach this terrain, authors of wartime testimonies tend to suggest that occupying forces and collaborators used social gatherings not merely to blow off steam, but as opportunities to assert dominance over civilians and to exploit those suspected of Partisan ties.

The legacy of Partisan entertainment remains full of questions – and, for me, in many ways unfinished work. The complexities I have touched on here point to avenues for further research and reflection. I, for one, feel like I have only scratched the surface. The sources that document Partisan cultural work and related entertainment activities, the ways in which Partisan women and men liked to have fun when the disciplining eye of the Communist Party was not watching, as well as how enemy soldiers sometimes weaponized those same activities, offer a deeper understanding of how pleasure, performance, and power can coexist in wartime settings. They also remind us that people navigate conflict not only through suffering and resistance, but also through laughter, song, and creative expression. And that all of those so easily become enmeshed together. Looking at these moments does not distract from the seriousness of war — it helps us see its full emotional and social landscape.

When Adrenaline Draws you in

REFLECTIONS ON FILM AND SKYDIVING
IN THE AFTERMATH OF ARGENTINA'S
“DIRTY WAR”
BY EVA VAN ROEKEL

This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.

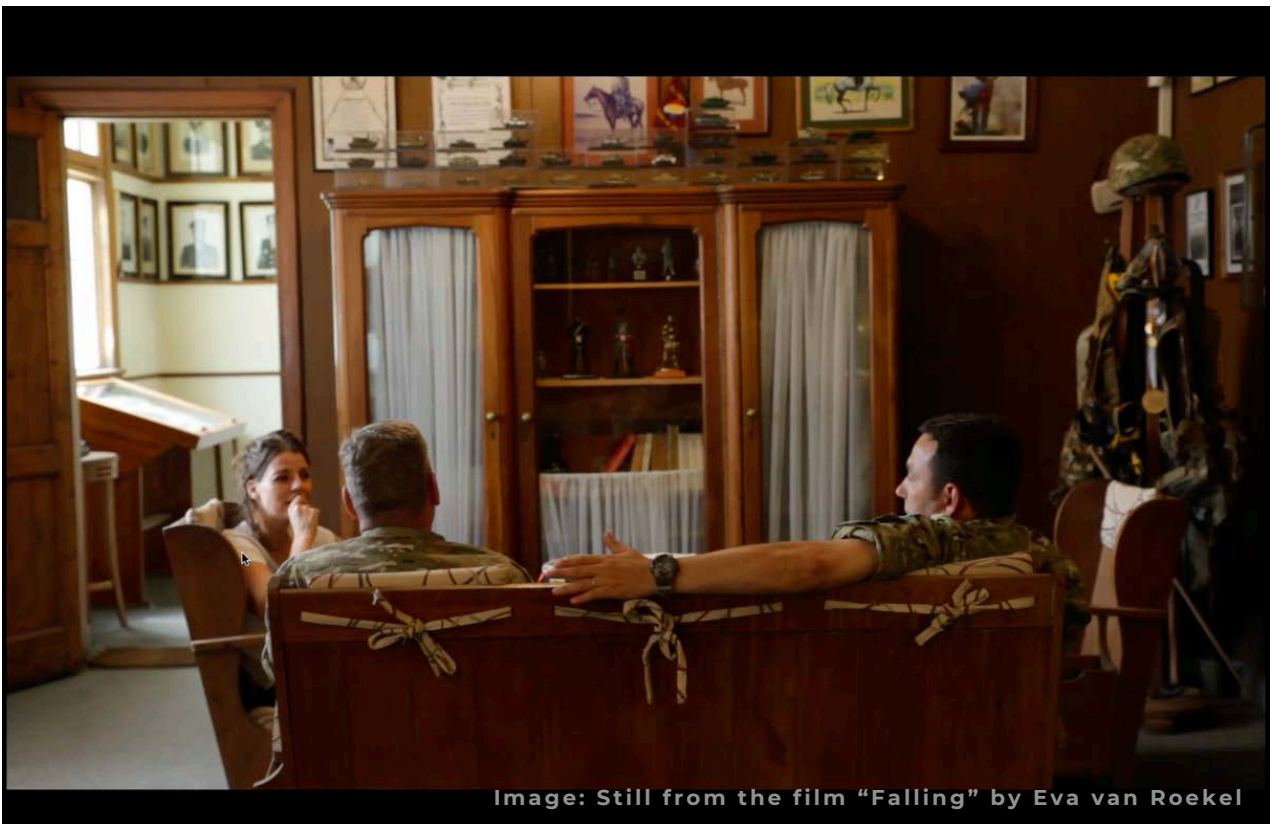


Image: Still from the film "Falling" by Eva van Roekel

I am currently wrapping up an essay film, *Falling*, about my fraught relationship with Pepe and his brother, two retired Argentine military officers whom I met during my doctoral research on crimes against humanity from the perspective of those who suffered and those who perpetrated political violence. As an ethnographer interested in the aftermath of Argentina's 'dirty war', absorbing their way of life has given me a deeper understanding of both human suffering and the infliction of violence. Our relationship has sharpened my intellectual growth and deepened my understanding of cultural anthropology. But it has also made it terribly complicated. As anthropologists, we are trained to approach our subjects with empathy. But when those subjects are involved in acts of violence, this approach can become problematic. How do we maintain social responsibility while dealing with the moral implications of the military actions we study? How can we engage with war experiences soldiers themselves consider fun?

The essay film *Falling* is the result of that introspection—a reflection on how these encounters have shaped my work and my understanding of what it means to be an ethnographer and a filmmaker engaged with individuals whose actions have contributed to war crimes.

We first met in 2009. Pepe was accused of crimes against humanity, which marked the beginning of our relationship. Both he and his brother were military officers involved in a period of state-sponsored violence during which thousands of people disappeared, were tortured, and killed by the military in the name of fighting a perceived communist threat. Some of them were pushed out of airplanes alive above the South Atlantic. The military's brutal actions were part of a wider effort to crush any form of opposition, real or imagined. But as I got to know Pepe and his brother, I came to realize that their understanding of these events of 'those years of lead' was shaped by a different narrative – one in which their actions were justified, glorified sometimes, and they did not fully acknowledge the horrors that had taken place.

I think one of the most insightful aspects of these interactions with Pepe and his brother was the realization that retreat from the atrocities was a powerful force in their lives. Pepe would often prefer to talk nostalgically about the physical rush of parachuting, about the moments of pure freedom that he felt as he soared through the air.



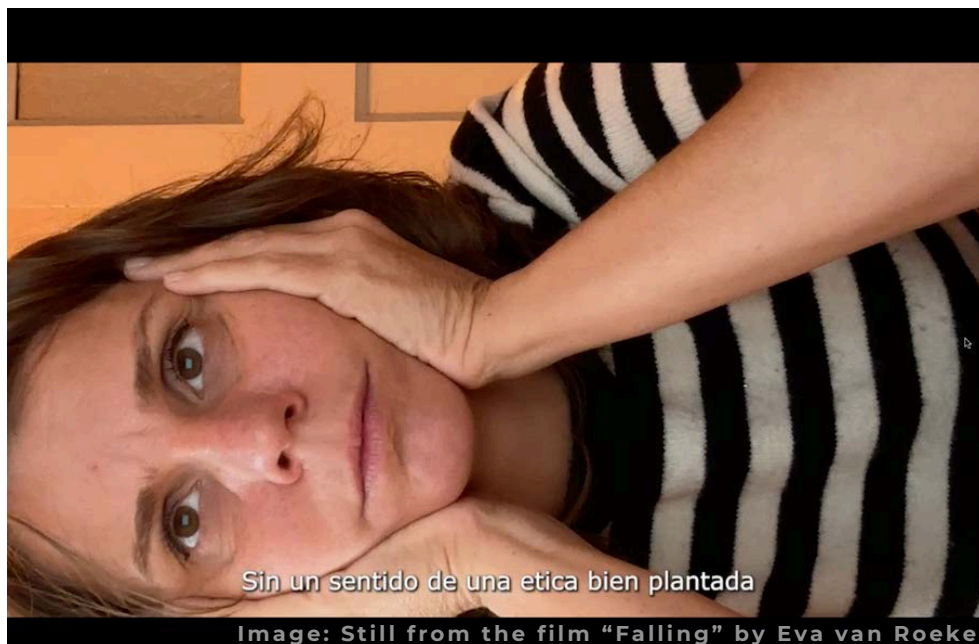
Image: Still from the film "Falling" by Eva van Roekel

He then kept talking about his time as a paratrooper, describing the adrenaline, the thrill of the jump, the camaraderie among soldiers. I realized that these earlier moments of exhilaration and fun seemed to define his identity. These memories were, in his eyes, the highlight of his military career. The highlights of his war. He once claimed that adrenaline had first drawn him to the military. He believed that my interest in his past was driven by the same fascination with excitement and danger that had motivated his decision to become a paratrooper.

At first, I resisted his idea of resemblance, dismissing it as a simplistic interpretation, offensive even. But over time, I began to wonder: was he right, perhaps? Was I too drawn to violence because of adrenaline?

Incongruously, concrete references to the violence were often pushed to the periphery of our conversations. Even when I pressed him about the atrocities, as I thought I had to in the beginning of my fieldwork, his silence spoke volumes. It was a silence that was part of a larger military code of ethics that I gradually came to learn about. Pepe's brother in return would often downplay their involvement in the worst aspects of the conflict, referring to the military's actions as isolated incidents of corruption rather than systematic abuse.

Could I simply indulge in such talk, I often doubted?



As an ethnographer, I had taken up the task to understand, not to judge. I had come to study the military world in Argentina, to grasp the complex social and cultural forces that shaped individuals like Pepe and his brother. I gradually realized that the theoretical frameworks and methodologies I had relied upon in my academic training were ill-equipped to help me navigate this moral terrain. Over the course of a decade of fieldwork and thinking and writing about it, I found that no amount of theory could adequately account for the nuances and discomforts that had shaped our encounters. The silence about the atrocities and the thrill about the 'fun' parts of the past that permeated our conversations were not something that could be explained away by academic discourse. Ethnographic vignettes neither did justice to these experiences. It was as if our evasiveness and the excitement demanded their own space, their own recognition.

I had not done justice to these brothers' experiences of their war. Nor had I accurately portrayed the complexities of their military past. I had not been faithful enough to the nuances of Pepe's joyful retreat in my writing and unwillingly I had imposed my own interpretations and those of hefty scholars onto his story.

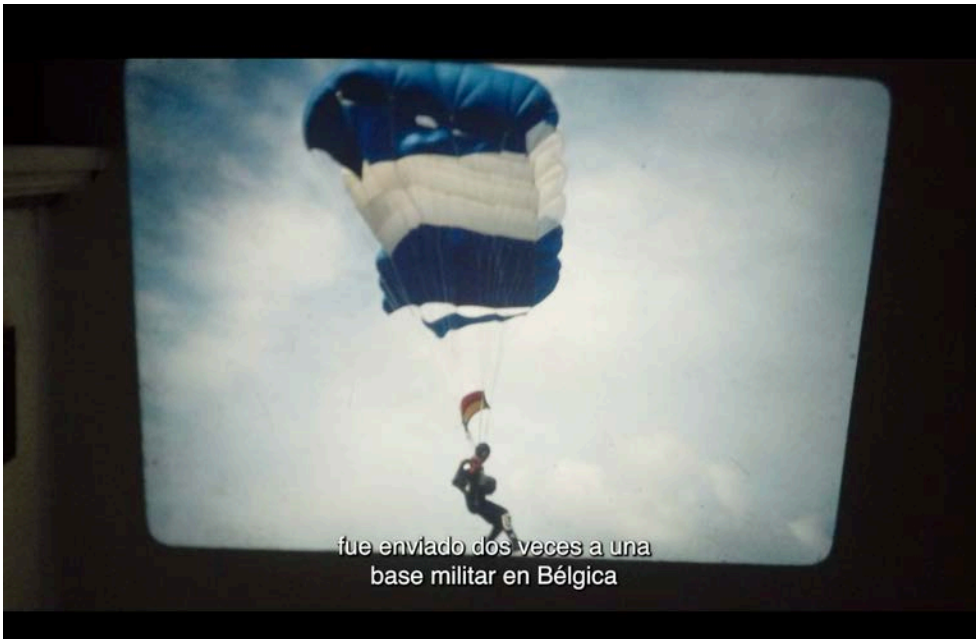
In academic endeavors to formulate a compelling argument regarding perpetrator status, there is a tendency to present executors of violence as either monsters or victims, thereby rendering life more comprehensible and morally acceptable (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Hinton 2016). Recent fascination with perpetrators in audiovisual media (Herzog 2011; Oppenheimer 2012) has also frequently resulted in the labelling of perpetrators as 'cruel sadists', 'true believers' or 'pliant conformists' (Mohamad 2015, 1161), which implicitly acts as a form of moral 'othering', I think this tendency to objectify militaries by creating fixed images that anchor them in a violent past (Anderson 2018, 95) offer only limited opportunities for engagement with the complexities and nuances of war in everyday life.

Film, I hoped, would provide a more flexible space for portraying their silences, Pepe's fun memories of parachuting, and perhaps other themes of war other than the violence that had shaped their veteran life. But when I began to expound my film project to some friends and colleagues, I encountered immediate resistance. My attempts to capture the exhilaration of parachuting, to show the adrenaline and joy that defined Pepe's memories beside his retreat from the past, were met with heavy criticism. Some argued that focusing on these 'fun' aspects of war was irresponsible and not including the voice of the victim was offensive even. I too had had doubts in how showing Pepe's jump might carry offense—an unspoken mockery of those people pushed from airplanes. They feared that such a portrayal would risk romanticizing violence and glossing over the atrocities that had been committed.

In my effort to experiment with media other than words, I found myself at a crossroads: how could I represent these militaries in a way that was faithful to their experiences without endorsing their actions? How could I balance the humanizing aspects of their stories with the moral weight of their crimes? As an anthropologist, my task is to explore the complexities of human behavior, even when those behaviors are reprehensible. But at what point does the intellectual pursuit of knowledge become morally indefensible? Ought I—as an ethnographer of the military—separate the intertwined excitement of parachuting from the violence that accompanied it?

Over the years, Argentinian colleagues and friends increasingly expressed concerns about the film I wanted to make. The ethical concerns around representing war criminals in a way that might elicit empathy or understanding were significant. These concerns were not just academic; they touched on my own personal experiences that forced me to engage in a continuous process of self-reflection. The film project itself became a process of contradictions, ambiguities, and uncomfortable experiences.

The cinematographic juxtaposition of images, sounds, and texts of exhilaration and silence, of freedom and confinement, of violence and fun, served me as a constant reminder of the complexity of human existence. Through breathtaking sceneries of parachuting, I explored the tension between personal joy and historical guilt, between the rush of adrenaline and the weight of past actions. During the montage and new stints of recording, the ethnographic 'I' turned into a cinematographic 'she' in order to make a compelling narrative. The tension between intellectual curiosity and ethical responsibility became a central theme of the film process eventually that turned the camera lens on the ethnographer and her ethical dilemmas, questions of complicity, and the intricacies of violence and accountability in her daily life. One of the key insights I've gained from this process of objectifying myself was the realization that the contradictions of the filmmaking were not something to be resolved but as something to be embraced in the final edit.



“The cinematographic juxtaposition of images, sounds, and texts of exhilaration and silence, of freedom and confinement, of violence and fun,”



Images: Stills from the film “Falling” by Eva van Roekel

After nearly eight years of work, the film is now almost complete. An intermittent process of montage has helped me to understand how to intertwine the adrenaline and nostalgia of Pepe's fun memories with the dreadful violence of the past without completely erasing it as I had wanted to do at the beginning of the project—they are, of course, intertwined. And it is through this cinematographic potential of intertwining sound, image and text, I think, that we can begin to appreciate better the complexities of war and its aftermath. Also, its fun parts.

By focusing on moments of joy and exhilaration, we are not absolving the perpetrators of their crimes, but rather inviting viewers to reflect on their own roles in the larger systems of violence we inhabit and the ways we live with violence and war ourselves. Creating a space where viewers can confront their own complicity in the consumption and production of violence, while also acknowledging the humanity of those who perpetrate it. This, I believe, is a form of epistemic justice—not one that justifies, erases or excuses, but one that opens up new ways of understanding and confronting what kind of knowledge about war counts as true, valid and important and which are deemed inappropriate or sinful even.

Writing this blog reminded me of the words of Susan Sontag (2004) who cautioned against the commodification of suffering in the media. The portrayal of war and violence indeed too often focuses on shock and spectacle. The fun parts too turn easily appalling. Falling tries to challenge this tendency in a roundabout way by engaging with the quiet and fun aspects of war that encourage reflection rather than passive consumption (Baxstrom and Meyers 2018, 52-57). Yet, it is a reflection clouded with unrest—a consideration that ripples rather than returns any truth.

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Once Were Vikings: Danish Soldiers on the Pride in (Lost) Glory

THOMAS RANDRUP PEDERSEN

This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.



Image: Camp Utgard (land of the giants), Logistic Support Area (LSA) Tripoli, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen

I love the Norse mythology. I really do, and the idea is just fucking great that when we die, we go to the Great Hall [of Odin] to drink and fight, right? I think that's beautiful. But at the end of the day, I do believe that I'm more Christian than in favour of the old Norse gods.

- PV2 Eriksen,[1] OIR, Al Asad Airbase, Iraq

[1] All my interlocutors go under pseudonyms to shield their identities.

To Valhalla and Armadillo: Public awakenings to pleasures of war

Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, September 2010. "You are the hunters. You are the predators. Taleban is the prey. To Valhalla! To Valhalla! To Valhalla!".[2] Thus sounded the battle cry led by the commander of the Norwegian Telemark Battalion's 4th Mechanized Infantry Company (Coy). Standing on top of an infantry fighting vehicle, Company Commander Rune Wenneberg was addressing his soldiers rallying around him. They resolutely responded by raising their rifles against the sky in time with their shouting of the old war cry: "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!". This rousing of fighting spirits was recorded on [video](#), published by [Dagbladet](#), shared in social media, and stirred a public outcry. What was going on? Did the deployed Norwegians actually take part in acts of combat, and did they on top of that do so as the revival of blood-thirsty Viking warriors?

Earlier in the same year, in May 2010, the Danish war documentary [Armadillo](#) had its first night. The film, directed by Janus Metz, portrays the war in Afghanistan from the perspectives of young Danes deployed to Helmand with the Guard Hussar Regiment's 1st Mechanized Infantry Company. Foreshadowing the moral indignation at the To Valhalla-video in Norway, a heated debate followed in the Danish public in the wake of *Armadillo*'s opening. What was going on? Did Danish soldiers actually engage and kill so-called 'insurgents', and did they on top of that do so with pleasure? To judge from the scenes depicting Danish troops high on the ecstasy of combat, high on the delights of reenacting acts of killing and telling tales from the battlefield, and high on the joys of bravado and comradeship, *Armadillo* exposes an inconvenient truth about war, an ethically disturbing taboo: war is fun, war is pleasurable.

**"To be sure, war is death and
destruction, pain and suffering.
Yet, there is more to war than
misery."**

There is more to war than a price to be paid in terms of human costs. Indeed, there might also be a prize to be won in terms of happiness (Pedersen 2017b), be that hedonic in the sense of feeling good, or eudemonic in the sense of doing good (Walker & Kavedžija 2015). Either way, happiness, it seems, might be a warm gun.

Pride in (Lost) Glory: Reconfigurations of war experience

However ethically disquieting it might be, a variety of pleasures appears to be fundamental to war experiences across time and place. Exploring the role of fun, and of pleasure more broadly speaking, an emerging field of research within the humanities and the social sciences has particularly within recent years gained momentum and reconfigured the experience of war (Bourke 1999; Lyng 2005; Gordon 2006; Harari 2008; Neitzel & Welzer 2012; Basham 2015; Brænder 2016; Pedersen 2017a, 2019; Saramifar 2018, 2019; Welland 2018; Achilli 2025; De Lauri et al 2025; Hamer 2025; Jelusić 2025; Johais 2025a, 2025b; Maringira 2025; Mogstad 2025; Rastrilla & Donofrio 2025; Sciarrino 2025; Tomforde 2025), not least thanks to Antonio De Lauri's [WARFUN](#) project. Contributing to this reconfiguration, the present paper examines a pleasure of war that has not, it seems, gained much attention so far, namely the pride in glory.

[2] My translation

Based on fieldwork with Danish combat soldiers deployed to Al Asad Airbase, Iraq, in support of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), I ethnographically and anthropologically investigate the emotion of pride in relation to the reputation and conceived glory not only of Danish troops who served in combat roles in the Danish Helmand campaign in Afghanistan (2006-2014), but also, and above all, of their construed ancestors: Danish Viking warriors in the days of old. In this context, the aim of this piece is to direct our attention to the emotion of pride as an important factor in fighting for who 'we' are and for what 'we' believe in.

Analytically, I attend to different aspects of pride: its agential and non-agential dimensions as well as its connections to social status and audience. I sketch out what at this stage of my work constitutes a tentative analysis; an analysis demonstrating that the focus on pride in the present context opens a window not so much into individual pride as into group-based pride. I show that the study of pride offers insight into happiness, hedonic as eudemonic. That is, into soldierly pleasures of feeling good about doing good in terms of feeling proud of one's achievements and of one's being and becoming, including one's belonging to and standing of one's group, be that one's unit or one's nation. By the same token, I argue that soldierly pride in glory is intimately tied not only to patriotism/nationalism within the ranks of the armed forces, but also to esprit-de-corps, morale, will to fight, and thus, ultimately, fighting power.

On the varieties of pride: A very short conceptual note

Theoretically, this piece draws upon the work of Alba Montes Sánchez and Allesandro Salice (2023) in conceptualising pride as an emotion along three different lines. First, approaching pride as an emotion of self-appraisal, we can, with Antti Kauppinen (2019), distinguish between two kinds of pride: 'agential' and 'non-agential'. When feeling agential pride, one feels good about one's achievements, such as defeating one's enemy in a firefight. By contrast, non-agential pride refers to feeling good about one's relatively steady qualities, such as one's identities, character traits, abilities, or values. For instance, one's warriorhood, one's perseverance, one's combat skills, or one's warrior ethos. Second, emphasising the social dimension of pride, we can direct our attention to pride as an emotion evaluating one's individual standing within a group (Sánchez & Salice 2023). Following Thomas J. Scheff (1990) we can differentiate between 'true pride' and 'false pride'. The former 'signals a secure social bond and generates open and respectful interactions' (Sánchez & Salice 2023: 36), while the former 'involves a self-aggrandising attitude and motivates behaviours that seek to obtain or signal one's superiority over others, including contempt and aggression' (ibid.: 37). Third, turning to 'hetero-induced pride', that is, to our capacity to feel proud of others, such as one's company or one's forefathers, we bring collective identifications and group-based pride to the fore. In doing so, this variant of pride indicates that 'how significant others fare in the world can have a deep impact on our own self-appraisals' (Sánchez & Salice 2023: 31, emphasis in original).

Some words on context: Vikingification of Danish armed forces

The groups of Danish soldiers that Armadillo followed up close belonged to Vidar Coy, as the then newly formed mechanized infantry company was called and thus named after one of the Norse gods, namely the son of Odin associated with vengeance. All the same, unlike To Valhalla, Armadillo did not dramatically confront its audience with the military's use of the Nordic Viking past. Yet, one has not to be much familiar with the Danish armed forces in general, or with Denmark's participation in international military operations in particular, to take notice of the fact that Danish troops, as with the case of their Norwegian counterparts (Dyvik 2016), frequently take pride in and visibly associate themselves with the Vikings and their Norse gods: names, call-signs and insignia of several Danish units and camps draw inspiration from the Viking Age and Norse mythology (Frisk 2017; Pedersen 2017b).

Moreover, Viking-inspired imagery, runes, and ornaments decorate online memorials to Danish soldiers killed in the 'Global War on Terror' (Stage & Knudsen 2012) and tend to be among the most popular motifs of the tattoos and jewellery adorning the living bodies of Danish soldiers and veterans (Frisk 2017; Pedersen 2017b; see also Grarup 2013).

The use of Nordic Viking past in the Danish armed forces seems to have increased coincidentally with the growing 'warriorisation' of Danish military professions in the heyday of the Danish Helmand campaign (Pedersen 2021a). However, militant/militarised invocations of Viking warriors and Norse gods are nothing new. Indeed, it forms part of the Viking revival, which has been ongoing since the Romantic era (Wawn 2000; Adriansen 2003; Dyvik 2016), and the use of Viking-imageries within the ranks of the Danish Army can be traced back to the Danish-Norwegian involvement in the Napoleon Wars (Glenthøj 2012). Fast forward to the Second World War: Danish Nazis were back then frequently drawing upon Norse mythology to evoke the might and glory of the Danish nation (Adriansen 2003). For instance, Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor, the Norse god of thunder and war, adorned the black standard of the Danish Nazi youth (ibid.). Here, we could also recall the rune-inspired insignia of Nazi Germany's Schutzstaffel (SS), not to mention the fact that the 5th SS Panzer Division was named "Wiking" – presumably because of its many Nordic volunteers. On this background, it can hardly surprise that the contemporary far-right in the Nordics and elsewhere tend to be fond of Vikings and Norse gods. Think, for example, of the anti-immigrant group Soldiers of Odin, which patrolled the streets of several Nordic towns in response to Europe's 'migrant crisis' in 2015.

To be sure, historically as contemporarily, the use of the Nordic Viking past in Denmark is by no means associated with right-wing nationalists only. For instance, during the Second World War, Tyr, the Norse god of war, became the symbol of the Danish youth that was ready to sacrifice itself in the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Denmark (Adriansen 2003). Today, Vikings have long been a national brand in Denmark, as elsewhere, and are eagerly used in marketing. Indeed, Vikings and Norse gods have become common in Denmark to judge from the number of museum exhibitions related to the Viking Age, and from the number of Viking fairs and Viking fight clubs and reenactments, let alone from the continuous popularity of Peter Madsen's Valhalla comic series (1979-2009). Add to this the more or less dark heroification implied by the growing global Hollywoodification of Vikings and Norse gods, which has been stimulated within recent years by the TV series *Vikings* (2013) and *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022) as well as by Marvel's film *Thor* (2011) and several sequels.

A few more words on context: A blaze of glory

Empirically, this piece is based on fieldwork with the 1st Mechanized Infantry Coy, 2nd Armored Infantry Battalion, 1st Brigade, Jutland Dragoon Regiment. The approx. 130-strong Company was formed in 2011 and named 'Viking'. The Company is based at the Dragoon Barracks in Holstebro, Mid-Jutland, where the Company's insignia, a cartoonish twin-headed axe, adorns the Company's quarters. In 2012, the Company deployed to its first international military operation: the NATO-led ISAF mission in the Afghan Helmand province.

In comparison, Viking Coy's older sister company, the 4th Armored Infantry Coy, known as Four of Diamonds, deployed to Helmand in 2008. Back then, the tours of duty were combat missions. However, by the time that Viking Coy arrived in theater, the main emphasis of the mission had shifted to training of Afghan security forces and to transferring the security responsibility to the very same Afghan forces. Viking Coy was subjected to a British-led battle group and based at Main Operating Base (MOB) Price in Helmand's Nahri Saraj District. The Company suffered no fatalities and had "just" a few seriously 'wounded in action'.

It was likewise in the case of Four of Diamonds, and both companies thus made “just” a small contribution to the statistics that no one wants to be part of: Denmark’s military participation in the US-led war in Afghanistan (2002-2021) resulted in the loss of 44 lives of deployed Danish men and women, more than two hundred physical injuries, and a still growing number of mental and emotional war wounds.[3]

The number of Danish war deaths and physical war injuries are by far concentrated in the time and place of the Danish Helmand campaign. This campaign became defining not only for the Danish military efforts in Afghanistan, but arguably for the Danish national self-image too, and perhaps even also for Danish national pride. At least this seems to be the case to judge from three related and often invoked narratives among observers in the Danish public as well as among Danish soldiers and veterans: first, the Helmand campaign involved the Danish Army’s fiercest fighting since the Schleswig War of 1864, thereby reviving Denmark as a warring nation. Second, the number of Danish casualties during the campaign meant that Denmark was the coalition partner in ISAF with the highest number of soldiers ‘killed in action’ per capita. Third, the campaign implied that Denmark, as a small European nation, was punching above its weight.

In 2018 and 2019, Four of Diamonds and Viking Coy, respectively, joined the fight against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) when the two companies deployed to Anbar in support of the US-led OIR mission. Both companies were organized into Company Training Teams and Guardian Angels. Both companies were tasked with the training of Iraqi security forces and were not permitted ‘outside the wire’ of Al Asad Airbase. As with the case of the prior seven Danish OIR rotation teams, Four of Diamonds and Viking Coy were based at the US-operated Camp Havoc located at the heart of the Iraqi-controlled airbase.



Image: Camp Midgard (world of humans), Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen

Apart from infantry, the Danish rotation teams were compounded of several other units, including, among others, staff, military intelligence, and camp engineers. The Danes were based at a number of small camps scattered across Havoc. Among these, as it was the case with the Norwegian Camp Midgard, a few took their names after Norse mythology: Valhalla (staff centre and quarters), Asgard (CCT and GA command centres), and Utgard (GA quarters).

Add to this, the blast wall mural of the Vikingified, Danish national folklore hero, Holger the Dane, guarding the entrance to the work areas of the Danish radar detachment and camp engineers.

[3] No official records are publically available on the numbers of casualties caused by Danish acts of combat in Afghanistan.



Image: Holger the Dane, CAMP, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen

Viking pride: A tentative analysis

In this section I outline the rough contours of my preliminary analysis. Reflecting the linguistic, material, bodily, and actional presence of Viking (Coy) pride among my interlocutors, the section is organized into four subsections: *emplotments*, *entrenchments*, *embodiments*, and *enactments*:

Emplotments

I'm proud of being a Viking. The old ancestors – there was bloody well not so much bullshit going on. Not according to the history books anyway ... I'm of course proud of the fact that Viking Coy was formed in the old Afghanistan. So, we serve amid that old history of the really old boys who deployed and who took part in fierce battles back then. So, I'm also taking much pride in being in Viking [Coy] because of that. Knowing that their legacy is conveyed, and that those boys have not been away in vain. You've not just left and switched off the light when they returned home. So, I'm taking much pride in that as well.

- GA, PV2 Eriksen

We have this history of being feared in most parts of the world. Not that we should be feared in the whole world again, but it's just that it forms such a big part of our history ... Denmark is a small nation. We don't have that many muscles to flex. So, I just think it's awesome that we have something as epic as Norse mythology and the entire history of the Vikings.

- CTT, LCpl Björnsson

Comparing Eriksen's and Björnsson's accounts, the narrator integrates himself into the Viking plot, as a member of Viking Coy and/or as a member of the Danish nation. Eriksen gives voice to a non-agential, yet group-based pride: on the one hand, in – as Eriksen perceives it – the Vikings' no-bullshit-way of being, and, on the other hand, in Eriksen's sense of belonging to Viking Coy. As such, Eriksen's pride seems to be 'true' in Scheff's (1990) sense by way of signalling a strong social bond to both Vikings and Viking Coy. However, Eriksen does also appear to feel agential pride not only in the accomplishments of Viking Coy on the Afghan battlefields, but also in the present day's safeguarding of the Company's legacy. Pride, it seems, offers a window not only into a sense of company-based *esprit-de-corps*, but also into a cultivation of the Company's track record and warrior culture.

By comparison, Björnsson takes non-agential, yet hetero-induced, pride in the epic dimensions of the Viking Age, all the while he also seems to feel agential pride in the horror caused by Vikings around the world. By implication, Björnsson's pride tends to come across as one harbouring nationalistic undertones, or, in Scheff's (1990) terminology, as a 'false pride', an aggressive haughtiness. In any event, in the case of both Eriksen and Björnsson, the feeling of pride, it seems, involves a pleasurable sense of masculinised self-enlargement, a sense of existential potency (Pedersen 2021b), a morale booster, that is.

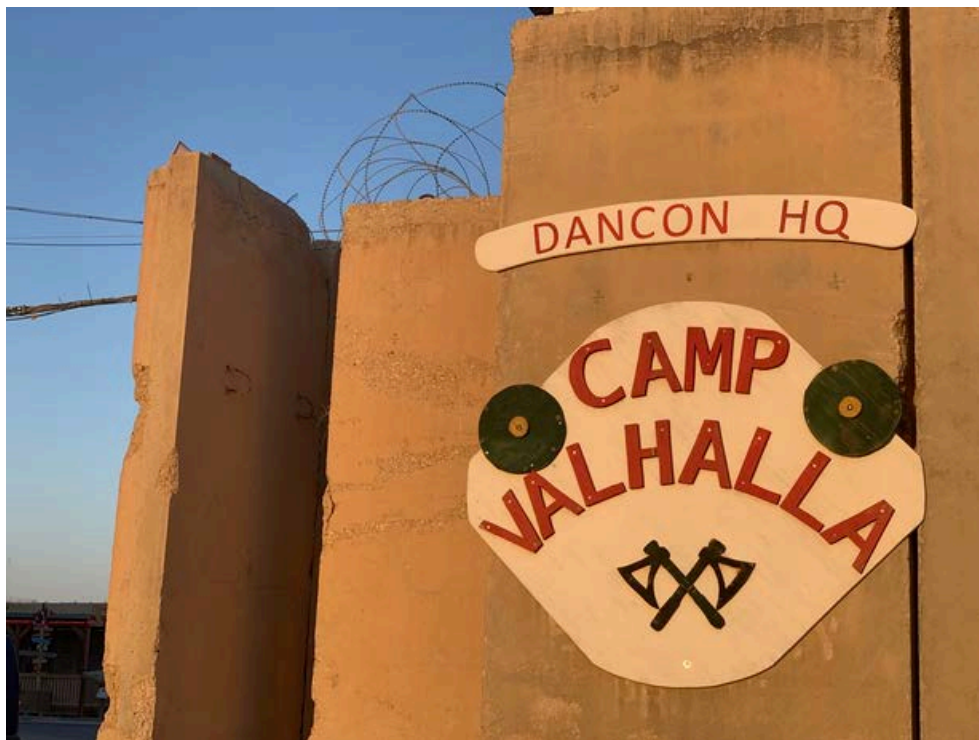


Image: Danish Contingent (DANCON) HQ, Camp Valhalla (hall of Odin), Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen



Image: Task Force Dragon HQ, The Morgue, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.

Entrenchments

You show that this here, this is us [by virtue of the Vikingified camp names and insignia], and this is the way we would like to be seen, and this is something we're proud of ... So, I think it's totally awesome that we leave our mark [on Al Asad], so people know who we are, and what we stand for ... Although we no longer plunder and rape.

- GA, PFC Aagaard

I think the first time I saw that things were named after one thing or another [in Norse mythology], I thought, 'come on'. To be honest, I think it was a bit dumb. But then again, it's fine. Things must have a name ... I just think that people who are not Danes have soon had enough of us staging ourselves so much all the time in relation to something that happened 1,400 years ago ... I acknowledge that we have this [Viking] history, and that's also great. Yet, it's also a bit unfortunate that this is really our only source of pride.

- CTT, Sgt Steffensen

Aagaard's and Steffensen's accounts contrast with one another. Aagaard identifies with a collective 'we', be that Viking Coy or the Danish nation, and seems to feel proud of who 'we' are, namely once were Viking warriors – at least as Aagaard perceives it. In any event, Aagaard appears to find pleasure in 'being-for-others' (Sartre 1943/2018; Sánchez & Salice 2023), in being an object of perception for Denmark's coalition partners at Camp Havoc: Norway, Germany, Poland, and the USA. By comparison, Steffensen, most of all, it seems, feel embarrassed, even alienated, from the Danish Viking theme at Al Asad. Indeed, the invocation of the Danish Viking past tends to make Steffensen feel the negative counterpoint to pride, namely shame (Sánchez & Salice 2023). Thus, instead of feeling pleasure, Steffensen seems to feel ashamed not only about his and his fellow-countrymen's being-for-others, but also about their apparent lack of prideful achievements since the Viking Age.

The use of the Danish Viking past is in other words disputed among my interlocutors. For the many like Aagaard it tends to evoke a sense of existential potency, a sense of having presence and significance in the world (Pedersen 2021b). For the few like Steffensen, on the other hand, the Vikingification of Al Asad appears to summon a sense of existential impotency, a sense of lost glory, perhaps even exposing Denmark, not as a revived waring nation, but rather as a nation with a long history of military defeats.



Image: Camp Asgaard (Home of the Gods) Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.



Image: Nidhogg - Dragon of Earth, “Kuffen” (field branch of YMCA Solider Mission in Denmark), Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.

Embodiments

I think it's awesome that we bring Norse mythology along [to Al Asad]. Also, because we're Viking Coy, and we live our lives a little through that, and we carry it on in that way ... The warrior is still in the Danish culture. Even though we are a small nation, we can still go out and fight against an enemy who outnumber us, or who is just as competent as we are ... So, the warrior mentality it's still there within each and all of us ... It's great that we can keep up our reputation and bring that part of Denmark into modern times.

- GA, PFC Aagaard

I must admit that I'm quite annoyed that the Norwegians [based at Camp Midgard] have our company name [as an Al Asad call sign]. We have a sense of ownership toward that name. In one sense it's a silly thing. Yet, it would of course be fab if they decided to use another name, and we then could use it ... I've acquired a certain pride in carrying the [Viking Coy] patch and in saying that I'm from this Company. That's also because I've been here so long. I've been part of those things that have defined the Company. It makes me feel proud to be able to say, 'I was there, and I was part of that'.

- CTT, Sgt Steffensen

Staying with Aagaard and Steffensen, it is interesting to note the difference in the kinds of pride they feel. Aagaard gives expression to a group-based, non-agential pride in who 'we' are as Viking Coy and, by implication, as Danes, namely warriors (as Aagaard sees it). Indeed, according to Aagaard, warriorhood seems to form an integral part of being Danish: all Danes have a warrior mindset, an 'inner warrior' so to speak. Warriorhood seems to form a kind of cultural legacy, not to say cultural DNA, which, as Aagaard perceives it, each and every Dane embodies by virtue of descending from the Vikings, and which is materialised in the Danish deeds in the Afghan battlespaces. As such, Aagaard's pride tends, with Scheff (1990) to be a 'false' one because it involves a somewhat aggressive and self-aggrandising attitude with nationalistic undertones. Accordingly, this kind of pride may motivate Aagaard's will to fight and dare him to prove what 'kind of stuff' he is made of.

By contrast, Steffensen's pride seems to be more to the 'true' side (ibid.) in terms of indicating not only strong ties to Viking Coy, but also respectful interaction with the Company's Norwegian counterpart despite the name/call sign controversy. Curiously, although Steffensen tends to feel ashamed of the Vikingification of Al Asad, he appears to take much individual, non-agential pride in Viking Coy's name and patch. However, this kind of pride, it seems, is intimately tied to the fact that Steffensen is one of "the really old boys", as PV2 Eriksen puts it above. Consequently, Steffensen feels a lot of agential pride, that is, he feels quite good about himself because of his own part in Viking Coy's defining experiences and achievements in Afghanistan.

Now turning to SFC Berthelsen's account below, it is not only the interwovenness of embodiment and materialisation that becomes manifest, but also the entanglement of pride and audience:

"Well, I think, when the Americans look at us, then they think that we're quite some Vikings..."

Because each of us is a hell of a guy because we're not dressed in the same way as they are. In the Danish Army you're allowed to have the kind of beard you want. We have decided that whether you're a good or a bad soldier isn't a question depending on whether you have a full beard. So, that's why they envy us a bit. We're also allowed to wear boots that fit our feet ... I don't know if that's a part of the Vikings. I just think it's the Danish mentality. It must work for us ... But maybe we look like some daredevils because we're not all wearing the same boots, and we have the haircuts we like to have.

- CTT, SFC Berthelsen

Berthelsen feels non-agential pride in what he describes as "the Danish mentality", which in comparison with the American one, makes Berthelsen stand out like "a hell of a guy". At least that is so when Berthelsen adopts the perspective, real or imagined, of the US troops at Al Asad. In that perspective, Berthelsen, it seems, finds pleasure in his and his 'fellow-Vikings' being-for-others, in their being as objects for perception, in their being as objects perceived as "daredevils" by virtue of their non-uniform, 'undisciplined', and thus hyper-masculinised warrior-like looks.



Image: Guardian Angel with Viking warrior tattoo, Camp Utgard, LSA Tripoli, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.



Image: Company Training Members with Viking COY t-shirts, Task Force Dragon HQ, The Morgue, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.

Enactments

The Vikings were all warriors. Great warriors. Big and strong warriors. And those Americans we've been talking to, they do also say, "Danish Vikings", right? That's what they call us ... Even Four of Diamonds were called "Danish Vikings". So, that's what we're known for, and I think it has a whole lot to do with the way in which the Danish Army performed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although, we were only like 400 men in total, we made a huge impression by fighting as equals with the Americans and the British ... We could do the same as they could, and sometimes even better.

- CTT, LCpl Björnsson

We call ourselves Vikings, but to me it has nothing to do with the proper Viking Age ... As for the axe [depicted at the heart of the Viking Coy insignia] it does not historically correspond with the Viking Age. It might look more like a Medieval halberd ... The Viking Age is appealing, and people think it's awesome. So, alright, they associate us with that, and we have sometimes joked about going out raiding when we go to one place or another. But to me it has no deeper meaning.

- CTT, Sgt Steffensen

Comparing Björnsson's and Steffensen's accounts, the former is dead serious about the use of the Danish Viking past, while the latter portrays it as fun or even ridicules it. The former account connects the Viking theme with sensemaking, while the latter shows the connection to be close to meaningless. Björnsson seems to feel good about the fact that US troops at Al Asad are referring to Danish soldiers as "Danish Vikings". He appears to feel a hetero-induced, non-agential pride in the Vikings as warriors and an agential pride in the achievements of the Danish Army in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Björnsson's pride tends once again to be 'false' (Scheff 1990) in political and military terms because of its self-aggrandising attitude with nationalistic undertones. Yet, in existential terms, Björnsson's pride is arguably imbued with a sense of masculinised self-enlargement as well as with a sense existential potency. Steffensen, on the other hand, takes no pride in other nationals perceiving him and his fellow-countrymen as Vikings. On the contrary, Steffensen seems to feel ashamed about the lack of historical accuracy involved in the Vikingification of Viking Coy and other Danish troops. That said, Steffensen is still able to find pleasure in the use of the Danish Viking past, namely as a source of dark humour.



Image: Viking COY patch complete with double-axe and motto "I shall either find a way or make one". The not quite so Viking-ish motto is allegedly associated with the Carthaginian general Hannibal in the Second Punic War. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.



Image: A horned Viking helmet crowning Viking Coy's Company Commander's personal protective equipment, Task Force Dragon HQ, The Morgue, Havoc, Al Asad Airbase. Thomas Randrup Pedersen.

Concluding remarks

In this piece I have ethnographically and anthropologically explored a pleasure of war that tends not to have gained much scholarly attention, namely the soldierly pride in glory. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork with Danish combat soldiers serving in Viking Coy on a tour of duty to Al Asad Airbase, Iraq, in support of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), I have made a rough outline of a tentative analysis of pride in (lost) glory. In a nutshell, I have sketched out a preliminary analysis of pride as an emotion evoked by past deeds of Viking Coy in Afghanistan as well as by the use of Danish Viking past at Al Asad, be that along the lines of emplotment, entrenchment, embodiment, or enactment. Emerging from the analysis, we can see, I contend, the contours of soldierly pride as a pleasure of war, not so much in terms of warm gun happiness as in terms of we-ness happiness, be that 'we the battle-seasoned Viking Coy', or 'we the Danes who once were Vikings', that is, great warriors, as the masculinised self-enlarging (his)story goes.

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When Soldiers Became Spiritual: Wartime Beliefs

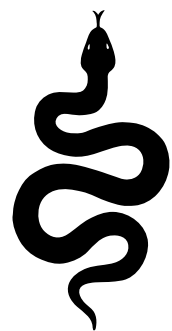
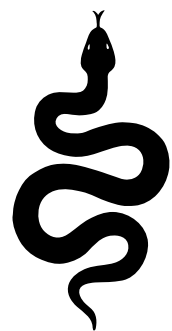
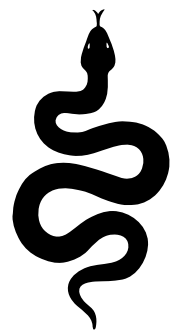
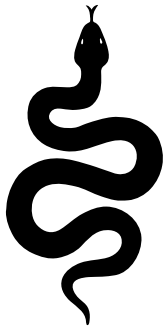
BY GODFREY MARINGIRA

This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.

The dominant discourse about war is that soldiers deployed and fighting in it dominate the landscape, and the animals that live in it. This paper focuses on the ways that Zimbabwean soldiers were made to understand the sacredness and spirituality of the Democratic Republic of Congo landscape: river water, swamps, snakes and ghosts by the local Congolese civilians. The paper reveals that even though Zimbabwe soldiers believed in the mighty of their guns, they were challenged by the war landscape. In some way for soldiers to live in the grotesque terrain of war, they had to conform to the local people's beliefs, that snakes are not killed, soldiers were not to bathe in either swampy or rivers with soap. It was believed that the river and swampy water was mermaid water. It was believed that if snakes were killed then the few remaining will multiply and spiritually fight soldiers in their trenches. Soldiers were made to believe that snakes understand why men with guns were living in trenches. This was similar to ghosts which could move across the deployment areas, and sometimes close to trenches, where soldiers were dug in. The central analytical question on which this blog post is based has to do with the ways in which soldiers were made to believe in local people's understanding of the landscape in which they were deployed. In particular the post reveals the ways that soldiers' knowledge of being in war was challenged by the spirituality of the local Congolese people, an issue which they had never anticipated on going

to war. So, war is not only about the knowledge of knowing the guns, conventional warfare, terrain tactics, but it has also to do with being made to believe what it means to live in and within the war landscape itself known to the local people. The Democratic Republic of Congo War has been referred to as the 'Great War in Africa', or 'Africa's World War' (Prunier, 2009; Reyntjens, 1999, 391). In August 1998, the Democratic Republic of Congo rebel formations backed by Rwanda and Uganda waged a war against the government of President Laurent Kabila. In response, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed troops to rescue President Kabila and his government. This was so because DRC was a member state of the SADC, and as part of fulfilling their mandate, member states such as Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, deployed their regular troops to quash the rebels. It was noted that, the DRC war caught these SADC forces unawares and unprepared for it (Maringira, 2015). In the case of Zimbabwe, this was evident in the ways in which soldiers were deployed, with very limited support and importantly without the approval of the parliament. The paper draws from the ethnography of being in war. Soldiers who fought in the DRC war were interviewed, in the aftermath of the war. While soldiers spoke about how they fought, they also talked about the landscape in which they functioned which they deemed a 'spiritual landscape'.

Believing the invisible: Ghosts and snakes in deployments



One of the greatest challenges of soldiers is to fail to read and understand the landscape in which they are deployed in. On being deployed to the DRC, soldiers carried with them the conventional military understanding of the war landscape: how to read the landscape, to navigate, and how to locate and do obstacle crossing to attack rebels. The DRC landscape was somehow different from what the soldiers could imagine. It was a spiritual landscape, a sacred one. The soldiers' areas of deployments were infested with ghosts and very big snakes. Soldiers, especially those on sentry duties could see ghosts in the night. As noted by one of the soldiers, Matanda:

It was another war, a war in which we were not trained in. Every night I could see ghosts, I could see a long and twisting flame of fire moving across the deployment. But I could not trigger the gun because that was not the target which I was taught in field craft lessons. This was an invisible target (interview with Matanda, 2017).

In some cases, it was not only about seeing the flame of fire in the dark that made soldiers believe that they were seeing ghosts in and around the deployment area. Sometimes the soldiers on sentry duties could hear 'people-like voices'. The voices were like people in a conversation. The soldiers on sentry duty could try to locate where the voices were coming from in the darkest hour, but they could not. If the soldiers advance to the sources of the voices, the voices would 'move' further ground. This made soldiers believe that the deployment area was imbued with ghosts as also Matanda explained while being interviewed.

You could hear some voices in the midnight. You try to pay attention to the voices; you could not make sense of what the voices were saying. I understood the local Congolese language, but you could not understand those voices. However, on sentry, some soldiers opened gun fire and shot towards the voices in the night, but on the following day those soldiers got sick. What was surprising was that the sickness, which the soldiers suffered from, could not be diagnosed by army medics. The soldiers were weak, and unconscious. They later explained what happened in the previous night, that they opened fire on ghosts in the deployment area. The situation was helped by one of the seasoned soldiers who was in his late 40's. He had fought in the Zimbabwe liberation struggle. He took them to a nearby village where they were told by the village head not to fight the 'ghosts', as these were the spirits of the land. The land was said to belong to the 'spirits', including the deployment area. Thus, even though the spirits of the Congolese land were not related to the Zimbabwean soldiers, they were said to be working alongside the soldiers to protect the Congolese people from any harm. In some way, the 'spirits of the land' were made to be 'friendly forces' to the Zimbabwean soldiers. During this visit to the village head the soldiers were told that they were not supposed to kill snakes in the deployment area. The village head emphasized that snakes in the deployment area were not just snakes as soldiers believed, but these were the spiritual symbols of the land. The village head stated that snakes in the deployment area had lived in the area since the birth of the Congolese land.

The snakes were representing the spirits of the land which the soldiers could not see. Hence killing the snakes in the deployment area was synonymous to killing the spirits. The soldiers were told not to be aggressive towards any of these snakes, because if they retaliate this could lead to the death of many of the soldiers in the trenches. Realising the incident which had happened after the soldiers had opened fire on the ghosts, the commanding officer (CO) briefed soldiers to pay attention to the local community 'rules' on how soldiers were to live in the trenches. What was astonishing was that the ways that soldiers were to live with snakes and ghosts was not part of the Operation Standing Procedures (OSPs) i.e. the rules and regulations to be followed by soldiers deployed in war. However, the soldiers lived alongside with snakes without the army headquarters being informed. Snakes could move in and coil in the trenches and in particular in the oil beds, i.e. soldiers' wartime blankets, and sleep alongside soldiers, but none of the soldiers was bitten by these snakes. Often when soldiers felt and saw the snake inside their blankets, they laughed off and say, "today I have a girlfriend with me". The ways that snakes were viewed as "girlfriends" is interesting because it provides us with a vantage point of snakes in deployments as spiritualized. Again, the snakes as spirits of the land were humanized, i.e. seen as 'girlfriends'. In a way the local Congolese people made soldiers to begin to view snakes as spirits, but soldiers incorporate this understanding to see them 'girlfriends'. They were 'girlfriends' in the sense that the snake type, such as kraits, cobra and mambas could take a 'nap' alongside soldiers in the trenches. As symbols of spirits of the land, snakes were also viewed as having the capacity to 'fight' in the war, as was noted by the Congolese village head where the soldiers were deployed. The belief helped soldiers: none of the soldiers were ever bitten by the snakes. This is despite the fact that soldiers could sleep along with these snakes. The snakes could overnight coil around the AK rifle, but at dawn, they would uncoil by themselves. For the local people, snakes in the deployment were said to be very cooperative and understanding of the soldiers' operations. In a way the

soldiers' belief in snakes as spirits and as 'girlfriends' had helped the local Congolese to establish social relationship with soldiers. The belief in snakes as spirits, had transformed soldiers from mere foreign fighters to local believers of and in the war landscape. Soldiers could not dominate the landscape as they had

envisaged at the time of deployment, but they had to depend on the local people's beliefs to be able to live in and operate in the landscape. This speaks to Woodward's (2014) writing of and about the landscape as a text. It is a text in the sense that the soldiers were made to believe in the landscape spirits. Thus, while Woodward (ibid.) asserts that military landscapes are dominated by the imprint of military activities, were soldiers exercise their tactical knowledge, the local spiritual beliefs of and about snakes, made soldiers mere dwellers rather than conquerors of the land. The deployment area and the lines of axis belonged to the ghosts: the spirits of the land.

Soldiers deployed along rivers mainly for tactical reasons. However, at a time of deployment, neither the commanders nor the foot soldiers had any detailed knowledge of the area, especially the rivers. It was the village head who told soldiers that they were not supposed to bath in the rivers with soap, instead they only had to bathe with water. In addition, soldiers were told not to swim in the rivers because that would anger the mermaids.



Image: Mami Wata by Beatriz Arana. Heybeee, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

River mermaids as a threat to soldiering

However, even though soldiers were told to refrain from swimming, they went against the village head 'orders'. On one Saturday afternoon, while other soldiers were bathing, of course without using soap, one of the soldiers swam, and in the blink of an eye, he was seen floating on water. The other soldiers could not retrieve his body and fearing for their lives they ran to the CO who called for the local village head. The village head then came to the river and spoke to the river waters and retrieved the body. The village head insisted that the waters in which the soldier had swum was one of the most dangerous places in the area, where it was believed that the greatest mermaid of



Image: Diego Delso. [Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

the river lived. This instilled fear in soldiers, as they found it difficult to bathe in rivers for fear of mermaid rivers. The CO ordered that the river was now an out of bounds area. Instead of bathing in the river, the CO instructed soldiers to carry water from shallow wells, and bathe within the deployment area. On patrols, soldiers avoided rivers. They could not patrol beyond the river for fear of the mermaids. Therefore, the spirituality of the river became an obstacle for the soldiers. It was foolhardy for the soldiers to then think of the river as a tactical area.

However, for the brigade commander and the CO commanding from the rear, the river was held with utmost and tactical significance as a strategic position to mount an ambush to attack rebels.

So, the challenge was that soldiers at the war front could not just withdraw from the rivers to deploy elsewhere, rather the deployment area was highly dictated by those at the rear: the CO. The deployment area was decided upon on a map. Soldiers at the war front would then deploy and carry out patrols as ordered from the rear. Thus, it was an initiative of the CO at the war front to deal with the spirituality of the rivers: infested with mermaids. Even though the CO could send a signal briefing the rear commanders about the ways that the soldier was killed by mermaids, it was hard for the brigade commanders to believe how a soldier could be killed in a river without providing evidence for it. Even if a board of inquiry was to be summoned, how would the question be fully responded to: how do we know the soldier who died while swimming was killed by a mermaid? Is there any evidence to substantiate the claim that a soldier was killed by a mermaid? Failure to respond to such questions would simply clarify that the soldier died due to negligence in the context of war.

The very fact that soldiers often could die due to an attack from the unseen, but things which those at the war front could believe in, positioned soldiers in a quandary position. The mermaids in rivers challenged soldiers' operations for whom it seemed impossible to patrol across and beyond rivers. The 'waterscape' was itself imbued with spiritual power of the mermaids which soldiers failed to fight. Soldiers could only depend on the spiritual knowledge of the local Congolese people, that they should not bathe in the rivers with soap, nor swim in the rivers. In a way this explains to us the ways the local populations dominated the area rather than the soldiers. While the literature on war and military landscape asserts that soldiers dominate and do violence on the landscape on which they operate (Woodward, 2013), the case of the mermaids' active presence in Congolese rivers reveals to us soldiers who were rather dominated by the spirits and the local people within which they were deployed.

Map and landscape reading

For soldiers to live and patrol and be able to locate enemy positions, they first tried to utilise the maps, and the grid references, but that was a challenge. It was problematic in the sense that in the DRC it rained most parts of the year, and

it was always wet. The features on the map could not easily be located on the ground. The prominent features could not be detected from the map to the ground. A tactical position to ambush enemies might be along the river, which soldiers feared: where mermaids live. Even though a map is a representation of the landscape to be read off (see also Woodward, 2004), the understanding and reading of the map was not synonymous and could not be easily applied on the ground. The ground had its own reading and understanding which was highly and often spiritual. In this regard we can refer to this form of landscape as "spiritualized landscape of war", one which is understood through the lens of the spirit.

Often on debriefing platoon commanders highly depend on sand tables: using sand to draw the strategic areas to attack the enemy employing the best possible route. For a sand table to be used, it has to be drawn a day before on the ground. This was not possible in the DRC war because heavy rainfall would easily wash it away.

In addition, the DRC landscape was characterized by thick forest. It was difficult to utilise the map to read and understand the landscape to enable patrol route and even lay an ambush in such a forest. The local people insisted that trees belonged to the ancestors and were not supposed to be cut down. The trees were believed to be the 'tree spirits', i.e. the spirits lived in those trees. Soldiers were not supposed to cut down the 'spiritualized trees' for both tactical reasons and for use as firewood. There were also specific trees in the forest which the soldiers were not allowed to rest on. These trees were said to be 'housing' the 'spirits of the forests'. If the soldiers went against the locals' beliefs, it was stated that, either huge snakes of the forests, which were symbols of the spirit, would swallow soldiers or bite them which would result in soldiers developing untreatable wounds.

Thus considering the very fact that soldiers have had with the river mermaids, seeing one of their compatriot dying swimming in the river, living with snakes and ghosts in the deployment, none of the soldiers would have wanted to continue risking their lives by not believing in what the local people say about the ways in which the soldiers were to live in the war landscape. In as much as map reading was an important military practice in war, believing in the local people's spiritual belief of the landscape was central in making soldiers live and 'operate' in and beyond the trench warfare.

Materialities of the landscape: Ghosts, snakes and mermaids

Here I want to engage with the military landscape which became spiritualized and was beyond conventional military reading and control. Thus if we are to understand military landscapes, in particular in the context of war: in an African setting where belief, rituals and spiritual practices form the basis of social life, for example in the DRC war on which this paper is drawn, then we need to theorize ghosts, spiritual snakes, mermaids and trees to understand the ways that military landscape's function. Ghosts, snakes and mermaids which spiritually emerge on soldiers' deployment areas, are in themselves, 'active agents of power and authority' (Fontein, 2014:713). The ghosts, snakes and mermaids do things to soldiers: they exert power on the landscape by obstructing and disrupting soldiers' tactics, i.e. ambushes and patrols. The ghosts, snakes and mermaids are 'materialities of the landscape', (Fontein, 2015: 12) i.e. they give 'life' to the landscape by establishing a relationship between civilians, soldiers and the physical landscape. Thus, the ghosts, spiritual snakes and river mermaids all viewed as spiritual, evince the capacity to intrude and disrupt soldiers' ways of understanding the landscape.

Thus, the active presence of ghosts, snakes and mermaids in the military deployment area actively re-define the military landscape. There is a co-existence of different materialities: the snakes, mermaids and ghosts which exert different forms of power and authority but all controlling the military landscape. The 'material presence' of the mermaids, snakes and ghosts produces evocative descriptions of the landscape as, e.g., mermaids of the river, 'spirits of the land'. This in some way reveals the immanence of the past that has the capacity to disrupt military power on and over the landscape.

Thus, while Woodward (2013) argues that the military do violence to landscapes on which they operate (which indeed is real), this paper reveals that, the materialities of the landscape: ghosts and mermaids, have enduring capacities to disrupt the violence that soldiers seek to do in varying ways and degrees. For Woodward (2014), landscapes are both a text and sites of experience. However, landscape as text reveals to us that there are different subjectivities which interface on

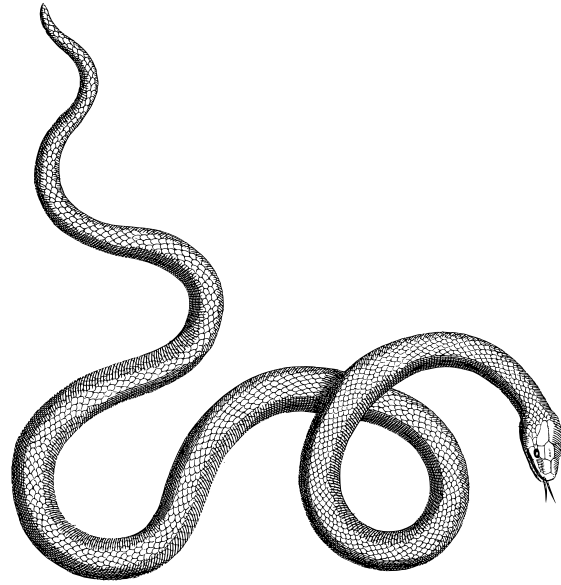


Image: GDJ from pixabay via Canva.com

landscapes: soldiers and ghosts and soldiers and mermaids and soldiers and snakes. The different subjectivities of soldiers and these spiritual objects is profound in shaping how the landscape is (re)defined. The experience of being in and on that landscape evince and invokes certain emotional and effective capacities.

Conclusion

The blog has revealed that the belief that snakes in the deployment areas were 'spirits' of the land, ghosts were protective, river mermaids were custodians of the rivers, and certain trees 'housed' the spirits, challenged the conventional soldiering practices, that of dominating the landscape. Instead of the soldiers violating the landscape on which they were deployed, the spirits of the land, water and trees dominated and dictated soldiers' ways of life and understanding of the landscape. The spiritual beliefs changed soldiers' tactics on patrol and ambush.

Thus, focusing on spiritual beliefs and landscape on soldiers' operations in the context of war allows us to conceptualize the idea of military landscapes, in particular on the ways in which natural surroundings are read and understood as spiritualized. Hence this paper has revealed that military landscape is not only what we see, but also how what we see, and we do not see, in these landscapes interact with the soldiering practices and challenges them. In a way, when the military landscapes are said to be imbued with the 'spirits' of the land, it invokes the agency of the spirits which establishes the relationship between the soldier and the invisible world.

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International Joking Relationships

BY EVA JOHAIS



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This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.

What can soldier humor tell us about international relations? To begin with, humor is a universal social practice that includes, broadly speaking, “attempts to incite, provoke or express amusement (Wedderburn 2021, 7). It is due to this ordinariness that humor has increasingly been taken seriously as a conceptual needle for taking a biopsy of international relations (Brassett, Browning, and Wedderburn 2021). The surging interest in humor is not an escape from politics but grows out of a sociological understanding of international relations as an outcome of everyday practice (Wedderburn 2021, 2, 3, 5, 26-28). Since humor is such a common mode of social interaction it lends itself to examining the social and political relations that it reflects, maintains, and challenges.

The ubiquity of humor as social practice implies that it also occurs in settings and situations that are considered antithetical to fun and amusement. At first sight, the military appears to be such a humor-free, bleak, and harsh social environment: soldiers relinquish civil liberties, discipline their bodies in drill exercises, subject themselves at the mercy of superiors, and accept the possibility of injury and death. In spite – or because – of these conditions, military scholars acknowledge that humor forms an integral part of soldier culture (Ben-Ari and Sion 2005; Godfrey 2016; Hockey 2006 (1986), 56–57, 72, 172-175; Sløk-Andersen 2019; Johais 2025; Tidy 2021).

This soldierly humor culture is particularly instructive for the study of international relations because soldiers are at the forefront of the everyday production of these relations during multinational operations or in other settings of transnational military cooperations. It is this assumption that motivates the following exploration of German soldiers' international joking relationships. Empirically, it draws on a research project on soldier humor that entailed in-depth interviews and group discussions with thirty-five current or former members of the German armed forces (Bundeswehr), observations at social events of veteran associations, during visits to Bundeswehr facilities and at the Bundeswehr Day 2022 in Warendorf.

The concept of joking relationships was originally coined by the British social anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown to describe a kind of ritualized banter in indigenous African societies. Joking relationships permit or require the persons involved to make fun of the other and thereby express mutual recognition of common "kinship or other types of social bonds" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 90; Apte 1985, 30). It is the ambiguity of humor that creates the possibility to reinforce and negotiate social hierarchies in a playful "combination of friendliness and antagonism" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 91). By joking, soldiers acknowledge each other as members of the same – the soldier – kin. At the same time, the special configuration of the respective joking relationship reveals soldiers' geopolitical conceptions.

The contribution will first sketch German soldiers' conception of the 'shameful self', that is the concerns regarding the use of humor in multinational setting. Afterwards, it examines German soldiers' joking relationships with their American, British, and French kin.

The shameful self

The main framework for the Federal Republic of Germany's military collaboration is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the context of the NATO alliance, humor is frequently used as an icebreaker in first encounters with new counterparts from allied forces and to loosen up lessons during multinational trainings (Interview 17.10.2022). And it is traditional practice that jokes lampoon national character traits. Illustrative of that, NATO appropriated as early as 1988 a cartoon about the reputed characteristics of the alliance's members and turned it into official greeting cards sold at the NATO headquarters and a table mat for an official NATO dinner (Lambiek Comiclopedia 2025)[1] Another variant of this genre is the joke about a 'good NATO' in which the different nationals have tasks commensurate with their special skills – British policemen, German engineers, Italian cooks – and a 'bad NATO' with reversed roles (Interview 17.10.2022).

German soldiers are, however, reluctant to blend in with their foreign comrades by joining in the laughter. The reason is the feeling of grief and shame that Germans have cultivated as the dominant collective emotions in the commemoration of the Second World War (Näser-Lather 2018, 109–10). Or as a soldier put it: "We Germans think a lot more about this historical background than other nations" (Interview 17.10.2022). The historical burden puts German soldiers in delicate situations:

"It is always difficult for a German if historical jokes come up – as is common practice at NATO. For instance, a Dutch once asked me: 'How long does it take from Berlin to Amsterdam?' 'No idea,' I replied. And he said: 'Five days by tank.' [1] *laughs briefly* Can be funny or not. It was funny for him but for me – wearing a German uniform – it was unacceptable to show that I find it funny. Perhaps we would have laughed together if in twos. But you never know how the third nation in the room perceives it. And then you always appear as the reluctant German who cannot laugh."

Due to the historical responsibility, German soldiers exert a self-control that is at odds with humor (Interview 17.10.2022):

"The essence of humor is to react without thinking and laugh out spontaneously or not. Even though in this case the Dutch mocked himself, it is difficult. You start thinking and that makes it technical. And I think that's why we Germans bear the stamp 'unfunny'."

The self-control in jovial multinational get-together is thus a real social handicap and reinforces the stereotype of the dour Germans.

[1] The cartoon 'The Perfect NATO Member Should Be' can be viewed here: https://www.lambiek.net/artists/h/hughes-wilson_jn.htm .

[2]The joke alludes to the rapid invasion of German forces in the Netherlands in May 1940.

An option for preventing being left behind completely and benefit from humor's positive social functions is to use harmless or self-deprecating humor (Interview 17.10.2022):

“Therefore, in international contexts, if I don't know the people, I only make jokes about myself or about Germany. That is always safe.”

German reticence likewise applies to the humor culture among German soldiers and is enforced through institutional policies. However, the military's norms of proper soldierly conduct reflect not only the German memory culture with its responsibility for past atrocities perpetrated based on a racist and nationalist ideology. In addition, soldier humor culture has changed because the armed forces have kept up with society's norms of appropriateness. Accordingly, it has been affected by the new awareness of sensibilities and heightened respect for minorities including that homosexuality is widely accepted. The most immediate impact on soldier culture came, however, from structural reforms, namely the admission of women to all military branches in 2001 and the suspension of compulsory service in 2011. A middle-aged soldier experienced a transformation of soldier humor in three stages (Interview 17.10.2022):

„Our own humor has changed drastically. Well, I know three armed forces: I know an army with conscripts, only men. I know a draft army that included women. And a professional army with men and women.”

He stressed that the integration of women changed the conversational tone most incisively:

“On the one hand, you don't make the jokes that men share among themselves anymore when girls are present – only if girls do that as well. But we condition our humor strongly – and I think that is really deplorable – because we always believe that somebody will come and complain. Then what might have been said gets politicized. It is going to be felt as sexually suggestive or whatever. Thus, humor has changed extremely.”

As a result, jokes about minorities and jokes about gender, respectively sexist jokes are nowadays officially tabooed (Interviews 06.04.2022; 08.07.2022, 17.10.2022; 08.07.2022). However, this does not mean that such jokes have completely disappeared as all interviews with female soldiers testified (Interviews 22.07.2022; 26.10.2022; 7.11.2022).

In multinational settings, the German military is less wary of gender discrimination but anxious to suppress anti-democratic, chauvinist, and racist jokes that glorify the German past, suggest a superiority of the German nation, or disparage other people and cultures (cf. Interviews 17.10.2022; 14.06.2022). For instance, the command of the German armed forces quickly banned a patch with the lettering “Pork Eating Crusaders” that circulated among soldiers in Afghanistan.



Images: Patch “Pork Eating Crusader”, Source: by courtesy of interviewee

The English lettering is allegedly translated in Persian or Arabic. However, it only takes letters from the Persian/Arabic alphabet that resemble the Latin letters instead of transferring the meaning in another language. The lettering encircles the image of a crusader – it can be guessed that his breastplate bears a cross – who holds a haunch in his raised hand.

Another example of institutional prudence demonstrates that well-meant can be the opposite of well done and illustrates the risks of wordplays in multinational settings (Interview 15.06.2022): In face of an imminent deployment to Afghanistan, the general of the 1. armoured division wanted to boost morale and camaraderie and initiated a competition for an official patch design.[3] The competition's objective was an inclusive design that would praise the division's pride but not hurt anybody's feelings and, hence, all proposals that were too martial or pretentious were rejected. In the end, the general approved of a design that was little inventive – and thereby not offensive: it displayed an abbreviation of the division's official name "Die 1". In German, "die" is the feminine form of the definite article. For a German, the patch thus simply says "the first". An American soldier was, however, amazed about this open prompt – or even curse – to "die first" when he caught sight of a German officer wearing the new patch: "You Germans really have the guts!" To him, the patch must have signalled that German soldiers were steely determined to beat any adversaries in a battle of life and death. In his effort to reconcile fun with control, the general had missed the literal meaning for English-speakers. And the end of the story confirmed the national stereotype once more: While the other nations were laughing, the German command prohibited and destroyed the patch immediately.

The big brother

On this occasion, the American soldier displayed more sense of humor than the Germans – probably precisely because the patch signalled an unexpected audacity. But apart from this exception humor has never been among the characteristics attributed to American soldiers. Instead, 'the American' represented the all-powerful big brother bursting with an abundance of consumer goods and facilities and excelling in operational efficiency.[4] However, the tribute paid for that is poisoned by conceit toward the lack of culture and intellect. The equation of 'American' with consumer culture strikes, for instance, from threads of the 'Bundeswehrforum'[5] where it is used as an established term for the supply with a multitude of services and facilities. And in one of my interlocutors triggered the memory of the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan a veritable storm of enthusiasm (Interview 22.07.2022): "The Americans had a PX[5] and a shop. They had a city! *tone of voice gets louder and increasingly excited* They had a pizzeria! They had everything! You became crazy! I thought I'm in cockaigne!"

The American dream was so attractive that the informal practice of 'Jukuhu' tours to American bases developed:

"'Jukuhu' [pron. yookoohoo] was the codeword for 'I don't have a relevant order but I really want to go there because I must buy food or something else'.

With the codeword, soldiers camouflaged their desire amidst the regular radio communication and the practice was eventually captured in a patch displaying the 'Jukuhu' owl.

[3] The difference between the two examples is that the "Pork Eating Crusader" was a fun patch that soldiers are not openly wearing and which are often produced and sold by local nationals. In contrast, the "Die 1." patch was the outcome of an official initiative that attempted to jump on the bandwagon of the popular patch culture.

4) Lair (2011) vividly demonstrates the abundance of US military facilities abroad at the example of the Vietnam War.

[5] Base exchanges (BX) or post exchanges (PX) are retail stores that provide tax-free goods and services to authorized shoppers at United States military installations worldwide including products from well-known brands (e.g. American Eagle, Sunglass Hut, Gap) and restaurant chains (like Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Subway).

Furthermore, German soldiers expressed respect for the Americans' operational efficiency ensured through strict drill and discipline (Interview 22.07.2022):

„I have never experienced such an army. We Germans cannot perform like that. They have so much drill. They are like robots. Everyone knows his place, his task. Just watching them is amazing. It runs like a clockwork.”

The formula for this operational efficiency is to “Keep it stupid and simple” which would also be due to the low level of education (Interview 22.07.2022):

“They work with simple communication, a lot with colours. So, they bet less on education, let alone self-initiative.”

Her comrade adds: *„What do we call that? – Cannon fodder.”*

Even if the American military proves highly efficient – under routine circumstances – German soldiers hence did not wish to swap because they recognized the downsides as well (Interview 22.07.2022):

“I have never experienced an army that treats its subordinate soldiers that contemptuous. They lead by fear and punishment. There is no team spirit, no balance, only extreme competition.”

The comparison between the American and German military amounts to a juxtaposition between quantity versus quality. Indicative of the American army's contempt of their soldiers was a difference in equipment by which the Americans earned the nickname 'rednecks' (Interview 22.07.2022): Americans necks were always burned by the sun because they wore simple baseball caps, whereas German necks were protected by tropical hats with brim.

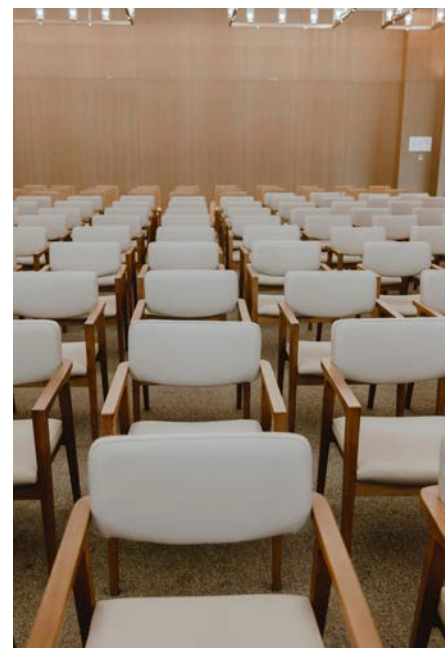
In light of this comparative experience, German soldiers praised the German leadership philosophy that is oriented at the model of the responsible 'citizen in uniform' and therefore applies mission-type tactics[6] (Interview 22.07.2022):

“I am grateful for being in the German armed forces since we are allowed to use our brain. I am glad that we still have this intellectual standard. That is mission-type tactics: You have a framework but how you move within it is up to you. What is important is that you fulfil the task. This does not work with the Americans. They only have straight drill. This means: Everything is prescribed. They are lost once they drop out of the structure. This is not to say that they are all dumb. But it is simply unwanted that they think themselves.”

Besides the command style, the contrast continues in daily routines and preferences in leisure activities (Interview 22.07.2022):
The American soldiers' everyday routine consists of “bed, work, sports”.

Moreover, common-rooms are designed in a way – with rows of chairs – that discourages social interaction.

German soldiers, instead, like to get together after work hours in common rooms allowing to group chairs around tables to face each other and chat.



[6]In mission-type tactics, the military commander defines a clear objective and orders which forces are supposed to accomplish the objective in a given time frame. Then, subordinate leaders decide themselves how to achieve the objective. Thus, mission-type tactics require that subordinates understand the intent of the order and are trained to act independently. In the German armed forces, this is the predominant style of command in contrast to the American military's tactics that are focused on executing a set of orders.

Another difference has ultimately adverse effects on the use of humor. As mentioned, sexist jokes – and other offensive jokes – are officially banned in the German military due to the increasing sensitivity regarding the discrimination of women or minorities. However, gender relations are not as scandalized and policed as in the American military (Interview 22.07.2022):

“In regard to the topic gender – really, really bad. If you went for dinner with the same woman three days in a row, you would be called in by your superior because they assumed you have a relationship.”

Accordingly, the negative effect of prudence on humor is more drastic (Interview 17.10.2022):

“I would almost say the Americans are stiff as a poker. In my perception, there is no longer any humor because it could always be considered sexual harassment.”

Overall, German soldiers paint an ambivalent picture of ‘the American’ soldier. On the one hand, they are impressed about abundance and functionality but at the same time cannot conceal disdain for lower intellectual and quality standards. This mix of jealousy and contempt reminds of anti-Americanist resentments that have been reactivated by different political-ideological camps since the 19th century (Dückers 2024; Scholtyseck 2003). The common denominator of anti-Americanist positions is to portray the ‘new world’ as the antithesis to own identity. In this caricature, the United States appears as the epitome of unleashed modernity characterized by alienation, uprooting, and acceleration. Moreover, the anti-American perspective associates the young and prospering country across the ocean with a lack of culture, decadence, superficiality, and disdainful materialism and consumerism. The source of arrogance is an opposing self-image that traces cultural and intellectual superiority back to the tradition of German idealism.

The model soldier

Such smack of arrogance is completely absent in German soldiers’ representations of British servicemen. On the contrary, the British are admired as soldier models especially thanks to their dark, yet witty sense of humor (Interview 17.10.2022):



Soldier statue, Bootle War memorial, Phil Nash
from [Wikimedia Commons](#) CC BY-SA 4.0

“For the British, humor is a national sport. They are unbeatable when it comes to black humor and it has always intellectual depth.”

The vital role of humor in British military culture has been detected for servicemen in the First World War in the humorous tone that is striking from troops' public communications, such as trench journals (Madigan 2013). By practising a sarcastic, self-deprecating humor style, soldiers created an alternative to the public's conception of martial heroism that envisioned soldiers as fearlessly enjoying battle and being willing to die. Staging themselves as comical figures instead, the soldiers established “a basic standard of soldierly conduct” that emphasised the power of endurance despite fear in face of the terror of enemy artillery fire (Madigan 2013, 94).

When it comes to present-day British soldiers, ethnographic fieldwork (Basham 2013, 117–19) as well as the analysis of soldier obituaries (Tidy 2021) confirms that a particular sense of ‘service humor’ lives on.

Among German soldiers, British soldiers are particularly famous and notorious for their mess culture (Interviews 08.06.2022; 20.10.2022).

“The Brits have a very strong mess culture, that is the culture of the officers' mess and officer corps. We [the German military] are already abandoning this and turning into a workers' and farmers' army. And part of this culture are the so-called ‘mess dinners’: These are formal dinners attended in gala uniform that are highly structured from the first course to the final port wine. There are exact rules for proposing toasts and reasons why specific regiments remain seated, for instance because they happened to be on some ship in 1884 and couldn't get up. Thus, insanely traditional and regulated! Until the port wine. Then these mess dinners escalate in a most brutal manner.”

With visible joy, the interlocutor recounts several mess games he witnessed (Interview 20.10.2022): Once, British and German soldiers competed in a gauntlet through a tunnel made up of a row of thick armchairs. The competitors entered the tunnel from the opposing sides and won when they muddled through the other end first. On top of the tunnel sat the commander cheering the teams with a whistle and by shouting ‘All my boys!’. As was foreseeable, the participants were marked afterwards by torn shirts and bloody scratches. Another challenge was to dance as long as possible with a burning newspaper stuck in the buttocks. Similarly risky and embarrassing was a prank played on the most drunken soldier on the last night of a joint military exercise: he was stripped naked, shackled to the bed with wire and then pulled across the parade ground by a horse. Laughingly, the interlocutor commented: “That was hellishly dangerous! Limbs can die off. Would you call that humor?”

He thus well realized the inherent danger and transgressive nature and understood why similar rituals are about to die out in the German military:

“These things were always very rough. Nowadays, you must be extremely cautious not to cross the line to physical injury or a violation of human dignity.”

Nevertheless, he could not resist the fascination and amusement of the British mess culture. A possible explanation for this fascination is that he considered it as the model of ‘real’ soldier culture. Indicative of this, he stated several positive functions of such rituals:

“Studies show: The tougher the unit, the harder the initiation rituals. Such rituals create an elitist attitude, an esprit de corps. It was a form of team building, a form of exuberance, a form of ‘We are the greatest’. That welds the community together.”

In continuing the tradition of mess games and initiation rituals, the soldiers prove that they are willing to take risks, endure hardships, and sacrifice themselves – their physical integrity and personal integrity – for the sake of the group, even if it is 'just for fun'. From the perspective of German soldiers, 'the Brits' thus embody the ideal soldier because they perform such practices that playfully support military socialisation and cultivate soldierly virtues (Johais 2025; Sløk-Andersen 2019).

The rival

The two joking relationships described so far are asymmetrical: German soldiers look both up to the American big brother's military strength and down on his lack of wit and intellect, whereas they adore the Briton as humor idol and, concomitantly, exemplary soldier. In contrast, the Franco-German relationship is a relationship between equal opponents. Compared to other nations "we are more strongly united with the French in a negative way" (Interview NG 08.07.2022). In this diverges the soldier perspective from the official image of Franco-German friendship that was sealed with the Élysée Treaty in 1963. Within the armed forces, the concept of the French as the hereditary enemy has apparently lingered on and was ready to revive during a mission abroad in the 2010s where German troops lived in a camp under French command (Interview, 8.7.2022):

"We had a hard time in this French camp. The French commander hated us. And since we have had a history of conflict with this nation and they gave us the feeling that they reduced us to what happened in the

Second World War from the beginning – of course, we hated them as well. There was a simmering conflict. Due to this World War Two effect."



Image: amethyststudio via Canva.com

On the one hand, it was banal inconveniences that the German soldiers interpreted as signs of French animosity: German soldiers had to be content with a single croissant for breakfast, whereas soldiers from other nations could get as many as they wanted. Their clothes were washed too hot, or items disappeared in the laundry. On the other hand, some of the acts perceived as discriminating were unmistakably relics from the past such as performing the Hitler salute or suggesting the so-called Hitler beard by putting two fingers above the upper lip. The German soldiers could not stand for this and struck back with the means of humor: they invented sayings or modified common jokes to make fun of their French adversaries. To make sure that the jokes hit their target, they were translated into French or English and written down at places frequented by all troops like toilets, watchtowers, and the dining hall. The opposing side retaliated with jokes translated into German and a veritable joke battle ensued. A tipping point was reached, however, when the French betrayed the principles of camaraderie – from the German point of view – by not rushing to help when a German soldier attempted suicide. Such an affront demanded revenge: members of the German special fun forces^[7] carried out a clandestine operation in the shadows of the night and hoisted a German flag on the five-meter-tall miniature Eiffel tower that the French troops had set up at the camp's entrance.

With this climax, fun was over: the offenders were caught and punished and the simmering tension escalated in a brawl.

[7] This refers to an informal 'fun group' that used to test each other with playful challenges during their ordinary service at home and also propelled the joking battle with the French adversaries during the deployment abroad.

While this is certainly an exceptionally drastic example, other German soldiers likewise described experiences with French troops rather as unpleasant than amicable (e.g. Interview 22.07.2022). This leads to the impression that the official military cooperation – within NATO and since 1989 in the Franco-German brigade – created “commanded camaraderie” at best (Interview 08.07.2022): “This [cooperation in the form of joint patrols] did not come from the bottom of the hearts. It was just: You have to do it.”

The imprint of history on present-day international joking relationship applies not only to rivalries but also to alliances (Interview 08.07.2022):

*“The Austrians and the Italians were our closest allies – *smiling* like back then.[8] They were our true friends. We were bound together deep from the heart. We also bantered with them. But this was funny. We had a similar sense of humor.”*

Conclusion

The exploration of international joking relationships has revealed German soldiers' conceptions of different armed forces in multinational settings. The status of the German self within international joking relationships is that of a reticent character who controls himself conscious of historical responsibility. He suffers from an inferiority complex towards the American who simultaneously earns respect for material abundance and operational efficiency and contempt for lack of culture, intellect and quality standards. From the German perspective, the Brit represents the model soldier since his superior sense of humor is equalled with possessing soldierly virtues. The Franco-German relationship is the closest and only equal relationship, yet marred by historical animosities. These representations reveal that German soldiers hold common national stereotypes but they enrich and enact them through experiences with members of other nations' armed forces. In this way, soldiers perform geopolitics by everyday practice.

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[8] This alludes to the fascist alliance between Germany and Italy during the Second World War and the annexation of Austria to the German Third Reich in 1938 that entailed the participation of many Austrians in national socialist crimes.

The Laughing Perpetrator

BY LUCIEN VAN LIERE

This text is based on a blog post written as a part of the Seminar Reconceptualizing Warfare and Its Experience, April 10, 2025, funded by the WARFUN project.

In photo and video material of violent conflict, a phenomenon regularly occurs that needs interpretation: perpetrators of violence who appear to enjoy their actions, or bystanders laughing or smiling while others commit violence. While laughter is popularly associated with relaxation, the laughter of perpetrators and bystanders seems to contrast severely with acts of violence and humiliation.

Even more so, watching videos and photos or reading stories about laughing and joking perpetrators arouses incomprehension and sometimes even outrage among a more distant public. Especially for those who connect or sympathize with the victim(s), the combination of humor, frenzy, and violence feels extremely confrontational, revealing shocking apathy or even sadism. Accepting that a perpetrator is cruel is one thing but accepting that a perpetrator enjoys killing or mocks victims certainly is another.

The phenomenon of the laughing perpetrator is widely reported, mainly by those who sympathize with the victims or who are traumatized heirs of victim groups. Laughing at humiliation or killing in the microspace of violence and the 'afterlives' of such settings through photos, videos, or narratives raises two questions that I will address in this blog. The first question is, simply put, why do actors (perpetrators or bystanders) laugh in settings of violence? The second question is rougher: how do the – what I call – visual and narrative 'afterlives' of these settings produce conflict-interpretations, and why? This second question is important because interpretations of laughing perpetrators are often fundamentally dehumanizing, reducing the perpetrator to a sadist or an inhuman monster.

In the history of conflict and war photography, the laughing perpetrator appears in iconic photos and video footage: The enthusiastic crowd attending the lynching of a black American (Sontag 2003, 72-3; Smith 2021, 2-4); the smiling German soldiers making Jews brush the pavement in Vienna (see Jewish Shoah Center), the seemingly smiling Ustaše about to sew through the neck of Branko Jungić (see Free Republic), the American prison guards smiling at the pile of naked Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib; IDF soldiers mocking Palestinians and Palestinian culture and habits online; these pictures and videos often have assertive afterlives as they reverberate sometimes for generations. They influence how we look at past conflicts, how we distance ourselves from the conflict spaces of these perpetrators and bystanders and imagine our position at the good side of history. This material – videos but mostly photographs – may eventually become part of collective antagonistic memories about monstrous perpetrators and vulnerable victims. If this happens, understanding the laughing perpetrators as human equals condoning them. But not understanding this perpetrator blocks a sharper analysis of why (some) people commit or even seem to enjoy violence under certain circumstances.

In addition to this visual material, the laughing perpetrator, who seems to enjoy war, battle, humiliation, and even killing, appears in many narratives, from zones of exception like concentration camps and prison camps, to war zones, combat zones, and street fights. The narrative about the laughing perpetrator contradicts interpretations of conflict, warfare, and violence as exceptional, serious business (De Lauri et al 2024). In this blog, I will confine myself to the visual witnesses of this perpetrator and ask why specifically photo and video material of laughing perpetrators has such intense afterlives. How do these visualized smiles, cheers, laughs, or gloats contribute to the intensification of memory and the iconization of suffering, and why? In other words, is it a coincidence that at least some of the photos and videos I described above are familiar to you, the reader? emotions.

I would argue that it is not, but rather that the very smiles seen on this material for viewers contrast sharply with the violence on display and thus contribute to the notoriety or even iconization of the material. This sheds light on how we perceive laughing and how we perceive violence and human emotions.



Image: Helgi Halldorsson, [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY-SA 2.0

Let's be clear about this: the iconization of the laughing perpetrator is not inherent to the setting of violence where killing or humiliation occurs. The microspace of violence differs greatly from the public, political, and academic spaces of interpretation where the iconization occurs. As the Warfun project shows, based on narratives from those who experienced the 'fog of war' firsthand, human emotions do not stop at the frontline of conflict. Excitement, release, anger, fear, joy, compassion, camaraderie, cruelty, surprise "coexist," while together, "these emotions shape the way war permeates the memories and bodies of those who experience it" (De Lauri 2024). Photos and videos become iconized in the external spaces of violence, where strategy, outrage, and interpretation take place. Such photos and videos are snapshots of a situation, often created by those belonging to the group of perpetrators and frequently intended to impress the home front. However, interpretations are activated as this material survives the conflict and swaps context. The laugh may become a token of the inhumane sadism and monstrosity of the laughing perpetrators and bystanders and creates spaces for the distant onlooker to morally disidentify.

Understanding Laughter

The laughing perpetrator is problematic because laughter and violence don't mix well in most people's interpretation. Additionally, what is humorous varies among individuals and requires specific commitments to cultural norms and (political, religious) beliefs. What may be benign for some can be offensive to others, which can actually also be part of the fun.

For example, Muhammad cartoons may be amusing for those who are not devout Muslims; the artwork 'piss Christ' by artist Andres Serrano can be 'hurtful' for devout Christians; jokes about the victim-groups of genocides are not well received by those empathizing with the victims; and jokes about traumatic events are generally unwelcome immediately after the event, such as jokes about 9/11. However, sometimes the shocked reactions of others can enhance the enjoyment, as the responses to the Danish Muhammad cartoons illustrate. Additionally, the taunting of victims from a seemingly threatening outgroup can become a spectacle in political arenas, exemplified by Venezuelan immigrant men who have their heads shaved, then are demeaned by their guards and led away. U.S. President Donald Trump presented a video of this during the 100-day celebration of his second term in Michigan in April 2025, as a cheerful crowd chanted "USA, USA" while watching the video. Clearly, humiliation can raise joy and can be seen as benign for a belief-sharing ingroup, but it can be considered offensive and shocking by groups that identify with or sympathize with the target group. This type of humor is generally referred to as schadenfreude.



Image: Mikhail Nilov via Canva.com

Schadenfreude is the German term for deriving amusement or pleasure from someone else's misfortune. It is, nevertheless, a pleasant feeling. According to Niels van de Ven, schadenfreude neutralizes envy, the feeling that often precedes the pleasure of another's misfortune (van de Ven 2014, 115). Richard Smith (2013) argues that "the more a misfortune seems deserved, the more likely schadenfreude is in the open, free of shame" (xiv). Indeed, in the background of schadenfreude lies a moral universe that directs how we perceive what is just, proportional, and fits our understandings of hierarchy.

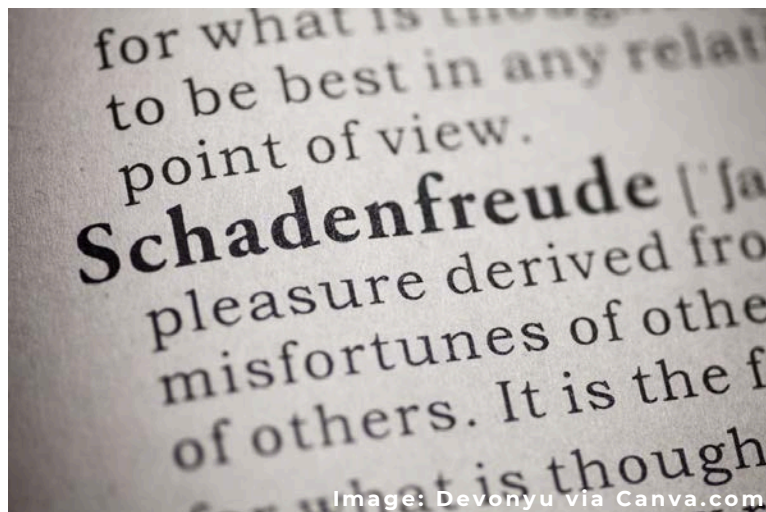


Image: Devonyu via Canva.com

We feel elevation if a 'wrongdoer' or someone who has trespassed our moral perspectives on social situations faces misfortune. Nevertheless, there exist further elements to consider in this context, which extend beyond the relational models that govern human belief and behavior. Generally speaking, people love feelings of being better and superior. People strive towards superiority and self-pride along the lines of culturally valued moral dimensions.

As a result, our striving towards superiority continually 'evaluates' the efforts of others. Being in the dynamics of competition, the other's superior position or superior way of doing things, degrades my position. The inferiority of others, however, makes me feel better about myself. This works at an individual, but also, and maybe even stronger, at a collective level where feelings of being superior can be shared and related to the inferiority of categorical 'others'.

In the domain of social psychology, the concept of humor and laughter is examined through the lens of asymmetry, as evidenced by the use of terms such as 'envy' or – even stronger – 'resentment'. Envy, Niels van de Ven (2014, 115) writes, is an important antecedent of *schadenfreude*. Envy and resentment could be interpreted as what Cikara and Fiske call "counter-empathic respondings" (Cikara & Fiske 2013). A counter-empathic responding is the result of intergroup empathy bias and points to the pleasure felt in response to out-group members' pain or suffering. Cikara and Fiske write, based on empirical material, that "[t]hese counter-empathic responses may at best allow indifference to others' suffering, and at worst facilitate harm against them." This might turn up in situations of violent conflict and war where people bond strongly with their national ingroup and may feel elevation or even celebration upon the enemy's violent defeat. The appreciation of humor, Zillmann and Cantor write, is maximal "when our friends humiliate our enemies, and minimal when our enemies manage to get the upper hand over our friends" (Zillmann & Cantor 1976, 100-1). This may also be emphasized further as these 'enemies' are not necessarily combatants but can also be civilians representing features that belong to the outgroup, such as religion or dress, or may have been discursively framed as threatening 'our' moral society and labelled as rapists, thieves, gang members, and profiteers, like the Venezuelan males led away on the video shown by President Trump in the presence of a cheering crowd. Rejoicing in another's misfortune is not so far-fetched anyway, especially not if the 'other's misfortune' seems deserved.

Laughing in Times of Violence

Can we now better understand the laughing perpetrator? It is not uncommon for perpetrators of violence to deride and taunt their potential victims. The function of laughter (which is thus not necessarily the same as humor) while committing violence can have many reasons, including destressing the situation by ridiculing it, and bonding with peers. But often, escalations of violence presume a severe difference between ingroup perpetrators and bystanders on the one, and (potential) outgroup victims on the other. Indeed, structurally, this is comparable to the condition of *schadenfreude* discussed above. The two Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, for example, were reported to have laughed during their attack on the high school kids in Columbine in 1999. Their laughing evolved into a rhythmic bonding that created an alternative space and might have made their attack less stressful. Discussing several instances where perpetrators were reported laughing while killing others, Randall Collins understands 'laughter' in such situations as elements of a moral holiday. A moral holiday is a free zone in time and space, "an occasion and a place where the feeling prevails that everyday restraints are off; individuals feel protected by the crowd and are encouraged in normally forbidden acts. Often there is an atmosphere of celebration, or at least exhilaration; it is a heady feeling of entering a special reality, separate and extraordinary, where there is little thought for the future and no concern for being called to account" (2008, 243). Weenink (2013) writes that the term 'moral holiday' covers the "the unpleasant and unpalatable fact that people actually enjoy disorder and destruction." Often, being together allows people in such situations to allow "each one's mood to feed off the other's". As a result, they can be locked into a "mood of frenzy and hysterical elation". For Collins, this direct social context is decisive. He calls this a hot rush and describes how emotions explode during an attack that remains unopposed. i.e., during a situation of extreme asymmetry between perpetrator and victim: "anger, release from tension/fear, elation, hysterical laughter, sheer noisiness (...) all of these are generating a social atmosphere in which persons keep on doing what they are doing, over and over" (2008, 94). This atmosphere is created through an asymmetrical entrainment: "the winner becomes entrained in its own rhythm of attack". The winner's moves are "reinforced by the moves of the loser" (2008, 103; Collins 2022). Although Collins and Weenink use the metaphor of the moral holiday, this does not mean that the emotions they describe that erupt in the microspace of violence are extraordinary or exceptional. What is exceptional is the killing, not the feeling of superiority, or the pleasure of feeling power over others, or the elevation felt if one feels the support of a group of bystanders, or the *schadenfreude* felt if 'the enemy' is degraded. Killing is and remains extraordinary, but what leads up to the microspace of

violence, the difference that is discursively and politically created between groups of people, the enjoyment of humiliating the 'bad guys', isn't extraordinary at all.

The Afterlives of a Smile: Haunting Photographs



Image: Megan Brady via Canva.com

Now that we have approached the laughing perpetrator through some theories on humor and violence, let's try to understand why precisely this laughter reverberates throughout history so severely.

Hugo Burkhard, a concentration camp prisoner, recalls how he will never forget the "horrible appearance of a tortured man and the satanic grinning SS scoundrel" who forced him to eat his own feces (cit. in Westermann 74). Schadenfreude, confirming ingroup sympathy and outgroup bias, might transform into 'schadenweh' (from Weh, 'hurt') for those who sympathize or identify with the victims.

In addition to Burkhard's context, settings of strong victim humiliation and perpetrator power can transcend their immediate contexts through visualities such as photos and videos that migrate into other areas where people empathize with the victims. Here, these materials have afterlives and may gain new meanings. Especially grimaces, smiles, and laughter contribute to the reputation and iconization of such materials.

In 2007, pictures were published in several Western news media outlets showing girls, women, and some men having great fun. In commentaries, these laughing people were placed in stark contradiction to their actual roles in the extermination machinery of Auschwitz. For example, Mail Online journalist Allan Hall (2007) reports that the photos "underline the sickening hypocrisy of the servants of Nazism – morally bankrupt, illimitably cruel – and yet able to laugh, joke, drink and sunbathe as if they were no different to anyone else." Although this picture did not show violence, it was the absence of violence that highlighted the contradiction with the cultural memories of the observers in 2007, in which Nazi guards are labeled as inhuman monsters. This and other interpretations exceptionalize brutality by detaching it from human emotions (see De Lauri 2024), making it more difficult to understand how human emotions and human relations function in places like Auschwitz or during moral holidays, as explained above.

A picture that obtained an iconic reputation and became part of cultural archives guarded by those who identify with the victim group, is the 1942 photograph showing ustaše militia posing while threatening to saw through the neck of a Serbian man (Branko Jungić). This picture has a rich afterlife on the internet and is often shown in online contexts discussing ustaše brutality. Three of the five ustaše are shown smiling in the picture. The picture was found in the pocket of a dead ustaše in 1945. According to a webpage dedicated to him in 2002 (!), Jungić refused to convert to Roman Catholicism. The site continues by stressing that his "martyrdom" represents the culmination of the suffering of the Serbian Orthodox people in Potkozar (Potkozarje).

In the TikTok age, soldiers use humor to bond with support groups at home, portray bravery, and tease or mock critics, as seen in provocative TikToks by Israeli soldiers fighting in Gaza. Such posts challenge norms, spread schadenfreude, and depict violence with levity. For example, in 2024, "Yazmine" reposted a video of a young man wearing an IDF uniform who says, "We are looking for babies, but there are no babies left," smiling broadly.

A woman's voice asks, "What babies? Say again," to which the man replies, "No, maybe I kill a girl she was twelve but I looking for a baby." The video picked up by 'Yazmine' was published at a time when international media was focusing on the fate of young children and babies in Gaza, while Israeli shows and press (although certainly not all) were downplaying the number of victims mentioned in international press and by the UN. "There are no babies left in Gaza" is a slogan that has been repeated several times, for example, also by Israeli football fans during the clash in Amsterdam in November 2024. Responses to Yazmine's TikTok repost are interesting as they show a strong dehumanization of this Israeli soldier and Israeli soldiers more generally. Most respondents to the video take the soldier's words literally and seriously. Among the more than 4500 mostly shocked comments, the words "disgusting" and "nazi" were very frequently used. Could it be that these shocking responses and disgust arise not only from the violent image that emphasizes the asymmetry between perpetrators and victims but also because this asymmetry is deepened by the smiles of the perpetrators? These pictures lend themselves well to being reactivated in different or in later historical contexts, as meaningful references to ingroup suffering and outgroup bias. They also lend themselves to reversing the asymmetrical relationship expressed in the photographs, denying the perpetrators their humanity or portraying them as inhumane and incomprehensible.

As mentioned above, most pictures and video footage are created by those belonging to the perpetrator group. Sometimes, pictures and videos are designed to tease or shock. At other times, they aim to demonstrate to the home front what the warriors do to the despised enemy. Interpretations of laughing perpetrators show strong positionalities, disidentifying with the perpetrator's emotions and actions, which easily leads to the dehumanization of the perpetrator and blocks understanding. However, this iconic dehumanization of the laughing perpetrator not only mystifies perspectives on what violence is and how to prevent it but also risks contributing to the same binary interpretation and dehumanizing dynamics that might have created the setting in which the perpetrator laughed. Taking emotions seriously, recognizing them, and understanding them is an important step to understanding violence and possibly to preventing it. After all, the emotion of being cheerful at another's misfortune is, as we have seen, an all too human emotion.

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The Presence-Absence of Violence in Perpetrator Research

BY HEIDI MOGSTAD AND EVA VAN ROEKEL

Anthropologists have traditionally concentrated on the victims of war and violence: those exposed to injustice, suffering, and loss—people we can easily sympathize with, and sometimes even seek to advocate for. In this conversation, Heidi Mogstad speaks with Eva van Roekel about her unconventional research on war perpetrators in Argentina—individuals indicted for crimes against humanity committed during the so-called “Dirty War” (1974–1983), a period of state terrorism in which military forces and death squads targeted political dissidents, left-wing activists, and socialists.

The discussion, originally recorded as a podcast interview in August 2025, has been shortened and lightly edited for clarity. It foregrounds both the significance of engaging with perpetrators and the ethical and methodological dilemmas such work entails. At the same time, it shows how perpetrators’ perspectives may complicate established theories and unsettle our moral and political assumptions.

Heidi Mogstad (HM): Eva, what led you to study perpetrators?

Eva van Roekel (EvR): In truth, it was not really my initial idea. I had applied for a PhD position in a project on transitional justice and retribution in Argentina, where part of my role was to follow the trials for crimes against humanity. However, the focus and approach were largely up to me, and early on I decided that I wanted to engage with “both sides” – that is, both perpetrators and victims. Of course, we know that the boundaries between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders are rarely clear cut in practice, but here I used the categories established by the judicial system and prosecutors in Argentina. So, I worked with that binary and decided to explore how both sides defined and experienced justice for the crimes committed.

HM: Anthropologists often focus on victims of war and injustice – people, we perhaps find it easier to like or empathize with – rather than perpetrators of violence. Why do you think it is important to also incorporate perpetrators into anthropological enquiry?

EvR: The short answer is that violent acts exist not only because of the people who suffer them, but also because of the people who commit them. Violence is relational. So, if we want to study violence, we cannot ignore perpetrators. In my particular case, there had already been years of important studies on the victims of the Argentine war, and I didn’t feel I had much to add there. In contrast, opening the “black box” of the perpetrators allowed me to study not only who they were and what motivated them, but also how they viewed and justified their own actions years later, and how they lived with these experiences. As you said, it is often easier to relate to victims of violence, whereas I believe it is much harder to imagine and affectively understand the standpoint of perpetrators. And perhaps precisely for this reason, it is essential to explore their worldviews and bring their perspectives into debates and theories. In some ways it is an effort to make the perpetrators “ours,” rather than reproducing the moral othering so common in post-conflict societies. I think many ordinary people and civilians prefer to leave war perpetrators as “the other” and avoid trying to understand them, but as researchers, I believe we should take on that challenge.

HM: I agree with you. However, not everyone believes it is ethically right or appropriate to center our research on perpetrators, as if this somehow “gives them voice” or attention they do not deserve. Did you face any negative reactions?

EVR: Some people think that trying to understand perpetrators is a slippery slope towards justification. So, when I talked or wrote about perpetrators, there were some who assumed I was trying to justify their actions. I disagreed, of course, with their actions, but I have become very conscious of this perception, almost a reflex to equal understanding with justification.

HM: That’s understandable. We see this misunderstanding today as well, when researchers trying to explain Hamas’s attack on Israel on 7 October are accused of justifying or trivializing it. It can be very uncomfortable—even mind-blowing—because, as researchers, we are trained to historicize and contextualize events, whether or not we find them acceptable or horrifying. Yet in today’s politically polarized environment, certain efforts to explain and understand are deemed wrong or inappropriate. I think this sometimes reveals our societies’ moral and political blind spots. However, it may also stem from a fundamental confusion between sympathy or support, on the one hand, and empathy as a methodological tool for understanding, on the other.

EVR: Yes. I’ve written a lot about empathy, and the necessity of building rapport with people you study, even when they are perpetrators of terrible crimes. Of course, this raises dilemmas – for instance about which stories and perspectives you share and with whom. I encountered some of these dilemmas recently when I made a feature length documentary about two Argentinian brothers, both perpetrators, and had to think carefully about what I could show and not show, and why. Focusing on perpetrators really puts ethnography in a tense position. Yet this is also where our methods and

theories can grow. Hence, I think that’s what we should be doing, even if it comes at a cost.

HM: Do you think there are any limits – ethical or otherwise – to the anthropological quest for empathy with interlocutors when they are perpetrators of violence? And did you ever encounter such limits?

EVR: One of the things I’ve argued is that empathy is not entirely in our own hands. It depends on the dynamic between you and the other person, and that dynamic is itself part of a wider social field. I also wonder whether we idealize empathy a little too much. I don’t know if I was always able to empathize fully with the Argentinian perpetrators, but I tried. And one thing I could really understand was their desire to “look away,” as they called it – not to revisit the atrocities. I could empathize with that. At times, with victims, I felt frustrated that they did the opposite: keeping atrocities alive, allowing them to remain present in daily life. To me, that seemed such a hard position to live with. Of course, choosing not to look back as a perpetrator is something different. Still, I could relate to this decision, and I also found myself not wanting to push them on those topics. Most of our conversations were not about the atrocities.

HM: That’s interesting. In a way, it means you resisted the expectation that researchers studying soldiers or perpetrators should always focus on violence and its most spectacular forms.



Image: Still from the film “Falling” by Eva van Roekel

Anthropologists often claim that what we do best – and differently from other disciplines – is to focus on the everyday and the ordinary. But with research on soldiers and perpetrators, I think we sometimes forget this. When I've told colleagues I study soldiers and war veterans, they often assume I focus primarily on their experience of violence – almost as if it's expected. I did look at violence, but it wasn't at the center of my research, just as it wasn't always central to their experience of war.

EvR: Exactly. My colleagues often found it strange that I didn't focus on violence and asked what else I was doing with them – as if there were nothing else worth studying. But as you said, people have many experiences of war that are not about committing or witnessing violence. And those experiences may not be central to their present lives either. Still, violence was always a kind of “absent presence” in my conversations – it lingered in the background even when not discussed explicitly. I think it's problematic that many assume the only reason to study such people is their acts of violence. People often asked me if I reflected on whether I would be capable of doing such things myself. I said I didn't know, but I believe everyone is capable of terrible acts. For me, the more interesting question was how such acts mark someone's life in the aftermath.

HM: Yes, and it's important to understand how perpetrators make sense of their actions. In my research with soldiers who have committed violence – occasionally killing in battle – they often relate to violence in ways very different from the moral frameworks many civilians, including anthropologists, take for granted. Like you said earlier, it's crucial to bring their views out of the black box. Too often people, even colleagues, act as if we already know what such people are like and place them in simplistic categories – which makes studying them seem unnecessary.

Another interesting aspect of studying those who commit violence is how they may challenge our own moral and political presuppositions about guilt and responsibility. For example, in an interview with a Norwegian Afghanistan veteran A, I pushed him to reflect on his responsibility, having fought in what many consider a problematic and meaningless war, and having served

alongside American troops guilty of war crimes. I asked if he felt complicit, and he replied: “Of course, I have blood on my hands – but so do you.” He basically argued that all citizens of Norway were implicated in the war, and that the moral distance between me as a civilian in a democracy and him as a soldier was irrelevant. Not everyone will agree with this, but for me this conversation showed how such perspectives can challenge our assumptions about guilt and responsibility in important ways.

EvR: That resonates with what Argentinian ex-soldiers told me too. They emphasized that they lived in a democracy and were called upon to intervene – “we followed orders,” “we did what you wanted” – with “you” being society at large. Whether or not responsibility can be equated in that way, I'm not sure. But perhaps it isn't up to us to provide a fixed answer.

HM: True. It's a difficult question, both politically and philosophically. But as ethnographers, what we can do is show how people reflect on it, and how their views can differ and even change over time.

EvR: Exactly. Questions of responsibility and guilt are always present, even if they are not always made explicit in conversations. And I think it's good that soldiers and perpetrators turn the mirror back on us, because it is easy to take the moral high ground and claim innocence. That easily happens when

“states monopolize violence through the Armed Forces, while civilians claim they have nothing to do with it. In reality, it's murkier”

– we are implicated in violence even when we are not committing it directly. In my experience, soldiers often tire of being scapegoated, constantly having to remind the public that it isn't so simple. In my work with two Argentinian brothers, they also often reminded me that I couldn't fully understand what they had done and experienced, because I wasn't there – on the frontline – beside them.

HM: I recognize that attitude from my own work with soldiers – but also humanitarian workers actually. In some cases, being an outsider – and especially someone without any military experience – may be a methodological challenge. Was it difficult to get perpetrators to talk to you?

EvR: At times, yes – especially when I tried to make a film. With “Pepe,” one of my key interlocutors, he never really liked to talk about the crimes nor the judicial process in which he had been implicated. Let alone talk about his crimes on camera. He preferred to talk about his experience of skydiving. He had been an elite paratrooper and truly enjoyed that part of his military career. Therefore, I had to make compromises and let him talk about what he wanted to remember. This drew resistance from quite some academics and funders, who disapproved of that angle.

They thought it was unethical to give Pepe an open platform. But I think it's important to reflect on how anthropology usually values not imposing topics on participants and instead following their lead. When the participants are perpetrators, this approach becomes more complex, even problematic. Focusing on a perpetrator's positive experience of skydiving was particularly problematic in Argentina, where crimes included throwing people out of planes. I knew from the start it was ethically fraught. But focusing on skydiving gave me an opening – and allowing him to talk freely about the experiences he valued and cherished created trust and closeness. His obsession with skydiving was also something I could try to make sense of as a researcher. I think it worked, especially in film, because visuals allow you to juxtapose the beauty of skydiving with the ethical discomfort.

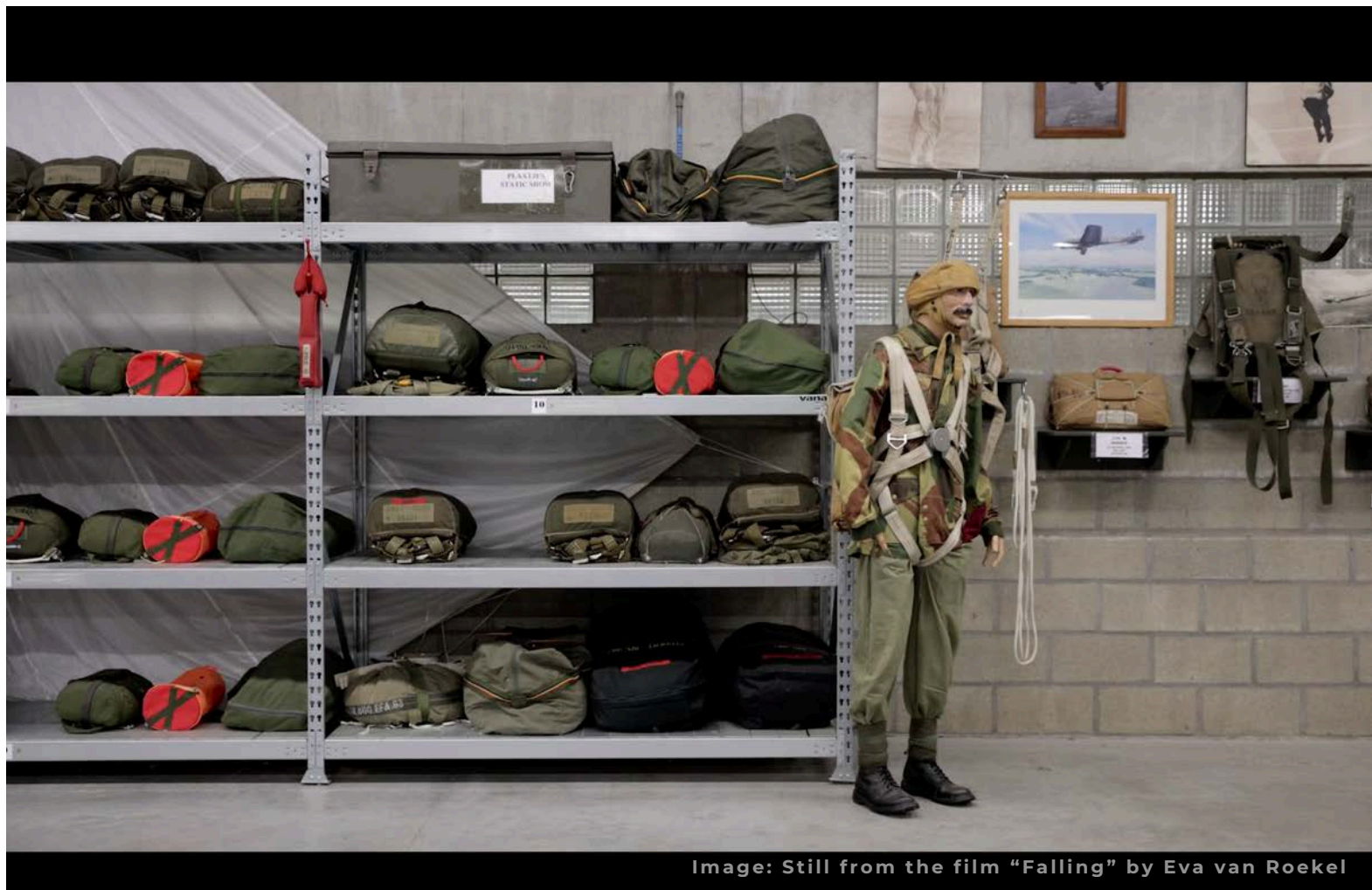


Image: Still from the film “Falling” by Eva van Roekel

In a sense, skydiving became perhaps the only way to suitably convey the absence/presence of violence in my fieldwork with the military in Argentina. Viewers might see stunning footage of flight, but they already know about the atrocities – political prisoners killed by being thrown from planes – so those images carry a disturbing extra layer, a kind of “present absence.”

HM: The atrocities are not shown, but they are always there, I see ... This also illustrates how turning to visual or more experimental methods sometimes allows ethnographers to communicate moods and ambivalences much more powerfully than text. I want to end our conversation by asking a broader question, which you in some ways have already touched upon earlier. As you know, Thomas Randrup Pedersen and I are editing a special issue on pleasures in war, where you are also contributing. What role do pleasure and fun play in warfare, and why should we focus on such positive experiences and emotions in our research?

EVR: I think pleasure and fun are part of life, and therefore also part of military life. For some people, especially civilians, it is difficult to accept that there can be pleasure in something we prefer to see as destructive and wrong. But if we don't allow ourselves to engage with these dimensions of military experience, it becomes hard to imagine why people sign up to join the army or participate in warfare. It is too easy to reduce them to lunatics who enjoy violence. A lot of documentaries and even academic work still approach militaries or perpetrators as sadists, complete lunatics, or victims-turned-perpetrators after traumatizing experiences in their childhood. Thinking this way might feel comfortable, but I believe it “others” them, rather than treating them as full human beings with all our complexities and potentialities.

In contrast, zooming in on pleasure and fun – recognizing these as very human aspects of life that we all seek in different ways and intensities – opens up a more nuanced understanding of perpetrators and their experiences of war or violence. It also allows us to humanize them again, and to see them as more ordinary people living their lives not too differently from the rest of us.

So yes, I think both fun and pleasure are part of military life, and because of that, they are worth studying. But I do think you need to be ethically armored, so to speak, and prepared for critique – because you will receive it. And then you need to have a clear story of why you are doing this research, and why it matters.

Humor, War, and International Relations

BY EVA JOHAIS, CHRISTOPHER BROWNING, AND JAMES BRASSETT

This text is the transcript of an episode of the WARFUN Podcast. It has been edited for clarity.

In this episode, Eva Johais discusses with Christopher Browning and James Brassett what a focus on humor reveals about international politics. With (international) politics increasingly becoming a site of 'comedification', they make compelling arguments why humor should be taken seriously. Be it its function as a mechanism of anxiety management, a tool of both governance and resistance, or its role in constituting political community, a focus on humor sheds light on both high politics and the politics of the everyday. Considering the differential role of humor in the Russia-Ukraine war and the conflict over Gaza they point out the constitutive role of humor in each case. Why, for whom and with what consequences has one of these conflicts been more 'fun' than the other?

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Eva Johais (EJ): I invited you to the WARFUN Podcast because it's fair to say that the two of you are vanguards of the study of humor in the discipline of international relations. And therefore, I would like to start with a simple question: How did you discover humor as a topic of academic inquiry? So maybe you could answer in turn or did you discover it even together? (...)

Christopher Browning (CB): Not together. (...)

James Brassett (JB): So, I think the boring answer is: I've been studying British comedy in my work on resistance for several years now. And Chris studies themes of global politics and ontological security. And we

thought it would be interesting to put the two topics together and see what happened. I think the more exciting answer is: it all started one night in a pub over one or two pints. And what was going on at the time was there was a kind of a crisis moment in response to the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris. And that was an attack that was being constructed as a crisis for France, obviously, for the French way of life, but also for civilization in Europe more broadly. (.) And Chris was at the time working around some ideas about the French response to that and the affirmation of French ways of life in response to terrorism.



Image: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0

And he was looking in particular at a meme called 'Je suis en terrasse'. This basically involved French people saying we will go and we will enjoy our cafe culture and we will continue our way of life. And in this ferment, we noticed that at the global level and via social media, there were a number of prominent moments of comedy that were expressing solidarity with France's response to the crisis. And in particular, rather famously at the time, John Oliver had a very kind of vitriolic response to the Bataclan massacre, which - I will say for listeners - does include one or two swear words, of which I'm just going to read the big bit that was circulated and went viral. And he said: 'France is going to endure. And I'll tell you why. If you're in a war of culture and lifestyle with France, good fucking luck. Go ahead, bring your bankrupt ideology. They'll bring Jean-Paul Sartre, Edith Piaf, fine wine, Gauloises cigarettes, Camus, Camembert, Madeleines, macaroons and the fucking croquembouche. You just brought a philosophy of rigorous self-abnegation to a pastry fight, my friend.' And we liked this kind of intervention, firstly, because we realized it resonated globally. Lots of people felt very energized by it, passionate in relation to it, identified with France. But we also noticed there was something very interesting in the humor, which was affirming a notion of identity, affirming a notion of civilization in response to these barbaric acts. And I think that was probably the kernel moment where we

started to realize there's a research project here. If humor is acting in a way which communicates broadly, communicates viscerally, makes people emotional and is being used for political purposes, that's kind of an important and interesting idea that we'd really like to explore.

CB: Yeah, I mean, just a very brief addition to that: within the humor around the responses to the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2016, you have things like the 'Je suis en terrasse' memes, which functioned in a way that you often see in situations of high anxiety at moments where nobody quite knows what the future would bring. So, nobody knew whether another attack was being planned, not all of the suspected terrorists had been apprehended. And yet people were going out in Paris, and they were sitting out on the terrace having a coffee and there was a lighthearted, humorous aspect to it. So, there you see humor functioning both as a way to manage anxieties, but also as having a community building function. And ultimately, I think we've become much more interested in that community building function, this sort of reassertion of who we are as French people. The interesting thing about the John Oliver quote that James gave is that this is also people looking in, also proclaiming to be on terrace, and also proclaiming that this French civilization is part of our broader, in particular, Western civilization. So, there's a

coming together of a “we” that takes place through humor in this, you know, particular kind of tragic moment.

EJ: It's great that you already started with an example that anticipates some of the things that I would like to ask maybe a bit more broadly. So, the things that you mentioned that you found interesting here about humor are this affective dimension, the community building effects, the questions of identity, and anxiety management. Can you maybe elaborate a bit more generally apart from the specific example, what do you think that we can learn specifically when we focus on humor to understand world politics?

JB: So, I guess in our research we animate several themes that keep recurring. One of the primary themes that allows this research project to unfold is the issue of humor and global politics. And as you know, we're part of a loose network around humor and global politics, and there are lots of people coming at this question in different ways.

“But I think one of the recurring themes regarding humor is the lack of seriousness, the everyday nature of it, the idea that it is just a joke.”

It's just something that people do for fun. It can be quite disarming. It can be - in the terms of your research project - just fun. And so, we tend to think about humor that it is not really about politics, that it is not really a political moment. And that is great for us because the second you define an area as unpolitical is a very political moment. You say: this doesn't matter, this is low politics, this is not serious. And for us, that is part of the reason why humor has proliferated quite easily across the kind of the mediatized spectacle of global politics, to almost become like an everyday language.

It's the way we talk about politics, the way we talk about or satirize politicians, it's the way we learn about events through things like memes, it's the way we, in a sense, act sometimes politically, if we take part in a hashtag, or if we have a pile on a particular politician, like, for instance, Liz Truss. On the other hand, it has for us also become a focus for coming back to how politicians then mobilize humor as a tool of communication. So we're interested in things like digital diplomacy. The prevalence of humor in global politics is right there in the social media accounts of politicians and institutions. They increasingly use humor to communicate some notion of relatability, some notion of authenticity. I think Obama was kind of a pioneer in this. But also, to critique other political actors and ideas, and we kind of see this prominently with someone like Donald Trump, who's quite happy to satirize enemies and friends alike, and to their face sometimes. And so for that, for us then, there's something about humor and the fun of it and the circulation of it that means that we can all partake in politics, and we therefore kind of explore ideas that humor can be a participatory form, that we can all participate in humor. And here we might, for instance, cite your own work, Eva, on participatory warfare, and the way in which people got very excited and memed for Ukraine through things like NAFO, the North Atlantic Fella Organization. In our own work, we've looked at the way in which MAGA[1] humor has become a kind of a decentralized way of participating the politics of supporting Donald Trump. And so, with this proliferation, with this participatory nature, with this sense of an inclusive politics, we therefore are able to look at the more ontological aspects. What is the ontological politics of identity, of discipline, and indeed of resilience that's going on in these moments?

CB: That was a very comprehensive response from James. So, I would just add to that is that one of the things that gets pulled out there is the way in which humor helps us understand the way in which international politics takes place across different levels

[1] MAGA stands for “Make America Great Again”, a slogan used by Donald Trump in his campaigns for the US presidential election (in 2016, 2020, and 2024).

We tend to think of international politics as sort of rarefied rounds of state-to-state relations.

“What you get with humor is the talking of elites to ordinary people”

and the experience of the international at the level of the everyday. And it's not always top down, it's often bottom up as well. So, I think we would suggest, along with others, that humor - as kind of turbo boosted somewhat through the advent of social media - is transforming to some degree the way in which international politics takes place, but is also experienced and who experiences it.

JB: So, there are critical scholars, Berlant and Ngai[2], who talk about comedification of politics. And I guess we're very much inspired by that. We're looking at the comedification of global politics and how that becomes then a productive area of research questions that we seek to unpick.

EJ: Thank you. So, if I may summarize: what I got from your response are two points. The first is that you emphasize that kind of the seriousness of humor, that humor is not the opposite of serious politics, but that it has its own politics and is a relevant entry point into understanding politics and world politics in particular. And the second, related aspect is what are the specific qualities of the politics of humor? So, and here I learned from your response that it is particularly well suited to explore the everyday politics of the international in contrast to a focus on the formal politics of institutions, organizations, actors. Did I get that right or do you want to clarify that?

CB: No, I think that's right. But it's also interesting - as James has

pointed to - how at the level of the formal, there is increasingly an adoption of humor. So, we can talk about strategic humor in diplomatic practice, for example. And, for example, a few years ago, NATO produced a kind of research document, which was analyzing Russia's use of humor as a part of its hybrid warfare. And the document was essentially concerned with trying to think about how to respond to the effects of humor on target populations be that Russian domestic population or targeted Western publics. So, there's an intriguing aspect to this document where NATO is trying to deconstruct how to tell a joke and how to respond with their own forms of strategic humor. So, you get the formal [politics] sort of embracing very everyday modes of communication as part of strategic diplomacy.

EJ: Okay, then I think we could add this third aspect. So first, there are the conceptual, methodological reasons why it is useful to focus on humor: that it is a form of politics in its own right. And second, it is particularly well suited to look into how we all participate in politics, and how politics work its way downwards and upwards to everyday practices and communication. And then thirdly, what you now just set out, amounts to me up to a kind of time diagnostic: that there's indeed a new role of humor in global politics. So, this is something- I would say - what you or what we have learned through this focus on humor in world politics. And I mean, there are other examples regarding the role of irony and also in relation to this fake news debate, because humor has this ambiguity. And - as you just mentioned the NATO document - I remember a NATO strategy paper on memetic warfare[3], which also discusses this idea of using the humorous qualities, but also the dynamics of social media for information warfare. So, do you want to add something else on this question of what we have already learned through this focus on humor in terms of an increasing role of comedification of world politics?

[2] Berlant, L. & S. Ngai. (2017). "Comedy has issues." *Critical Inquiry* 43: 233-249.

[3] Giese, J. (2016). "It's time to embrace memetic warfare." *Defence Strategic Communications* 1: 67-75. Accessed February 21, 2023. [DOI: 10.30966/2018.RIGA.1.4](https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.RIGA.1.4).

JB: So yeah, I like very much the way you summarized that notion of almost a part of information warfare and humor. I think the way we think about it is that there's a tendency to instrumentalise humor and say, well, telling jokes is a great way to engage in politics or to do resistance. But increasingly we see that humor has become a science of politics. What is permissible to laugh about and also what you should not laugh about can become the terrain of legitimate political discussion. And that's just an interesting sociological moment for us. And in the theory that we've been developing around humor and ontological security, the sociological dimension is the recurring key that unlocks a lot of things. Humor can be, on the one hand, very inclusive, anxiety relieving, community building, solidarity expressing. Humor can be a wonderful thing. To tell a joke or to find one funny can be a really important moment.



Image: Truecreatives via Canva.com

Some of the best moments we experience as human beings is when we share laughter together. But at the same time, and because of that, jokes can equally be about people who do not fit, who do not live up to our understandings of social norms and social rules. And it can also be about the identification of those who are others or outside in some way. And this kind of ontological ambiguity about what humor is doing at any point is just an incredibly political and politically interesting prism through which to understand the world. It can be disciplinary, it can be divisive, it can be hierarchic. You can think in particular about nationalist humor, racist humor, sexist humor, but also Eurocentrism. So, in one of our papers[4], we looked at the various responses to the Danish cartoon crisis and Charlie Hebdo and indeed Bataclan, where many actors, political actors, commentators, academics, have kind of affirmed humor and satire as this kind of fundamental, reflective component of liberalism and liberal ways of life. Humor is almost a normative thing: you have to be able to laugh at yourself in order to be a reflexive liberal subject. And so when humor is being affirmed as part of a way of life, about who we are - and concomitantly - if you don't live up to that, maybe you're not one of us, then we can see through the layers of acceptable citizenship within different spaces and places of politics in a way which has yielded our interest. So, there were some interesting insights on participatory warfare and international diplomacy among others. Likewise, some of the Brexit negotiations were marked by incredibly humorous moments that were at the same time an identification of in-group and out-group and acceptable ways of life and unacceptable forms. You could think about much of the opposition between populism and what you might call anti-populism or critiques of populism in terms of acceptable and unacceptable forms of humor. For a long time in the US, it was possible to say that Trump's jokes are not acceptable jokes, they're the wrong kind of humor, they're not a reflexive

[4] Brassett, J., C. S. Browning, & M. O'Dwyer.(2021). "EU've Got to Be Kidding: Anxiety, Humour and Ontological Security." *Global Society* 35 (1): 8–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1828298>

critical humor. And over time, I think he's progressively normalized and legitimated his form of humor. I don't know if people would accept this, but he performs it as anti-establishment or critical or resistant of what he perceives as a kind of a liberal mainstream. Thus, a focus on the sociological effects of humor can unlock the terms of political discourse in ways which for us have been very enlightening and proliferative of research angles.

EJ: I think we've now got a very good overview of the spectrum of what a focus on humor can reveal and what we can learn from that. And you've also already mentioned some of the concepts and topics that you've been working on. And to now get an even better grasp on this, I would like to come to a specific example of your work: I know that you have been working together more recently on a contribution that asks somewhat provocatively why the war in Gaza is not as much fun as the Russian-Ukrainian war. And this title or suggestion for me already triggers a lot of questions itself. To start with, who is the subject that had a kind of fun in the Russian-Ukrainian war and what kind of fun are you talking about?

CB: Yes, thanks Eva. So, I think we would say that this operates at different levels. So, for instance, as we said before, there's been a long history of analyses that explore the anxiety relieving function that humor can provide for people in times of extreme stress or of existential threat like war. So, listeners might recall things like the Ukrainian dancing soldiers that became widely memed. No doubt they were having a certain amount of fun and humor bolstered a sense of societal resilience in Ukraine in general. Some of that was mediated through things like the famous Ukrainian tractor brigade stealing Russian tanks, for example, or there was an older lady who was confronted by some Russian soldiers. And I think the Russian soldiers gave her some seeds and she said that the only good thing that's going to come from their presence here is that they'll be sort of fertilizing the ground for new flowers in the future. So, a kind of dark form of humor. But there was something resilient about it. Mainly, though, our analysis explores humor as a mechanism of vicarious identification. and empathy or

admiration, but it's when we start kind of seeing the other as an extension of the Self. So, we would argue that you could see this across the West, in the UK, also in NATO. So, regarding the UK context, we suggest that the Ukraine war became an opportunity to manage post-Brexit anxieties and floundering about Britain's role following Brexit. In contrast to the very divisive nature of Brexit politics, through vicarious identifying with the Ukrainian fight, there was at least some sense in which the British population could come together again. There's a sort of sense of purpose that we know who we are, again, that we have a role. Ukraine becomes appropriated into this notion of a new Cold War, for example. But fun might not necessarily be the right word for this. So, we might think of it a little bit more in terms of enjoyment or in a Lacanian sense of *jouissance*. This sense that through Ukraine, it became possible for different subjects to rediscover, if only temporarily, some sense of fulfilment of the self, that we can actually be who we claim to be, but we have kept failing to be. So, to just give you one quick example of that: listeners might recall that prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, NATO seemed to be on life support, by and large. And yet, within weeks, it was like NATO was back. NATO all of a sudden had a purpose, a goal. Things have moved on since then. But at least for this short period, this coalescence could take place around the war in Ukraine that we would argue was inherently vicarious. And humor was playing fundamentally important roles in enabling that to happen in the first place.

EJ: Okay, thank you. So, when I got this correctly, the subject that you are concerned with were not the Ukrainians and how they were using humor as a stress relief, employed dark humor, or ridiculed the adversary. Rather, you are interested in how this vicarious identification works with distant audiences in the UK or in the West more generally. And so, the fun that you're talking about is this identification which has several positive functions. And the first is this anxiety management that you also already mentioned before which is here a coping mechanism,

not just for people in the war zone, but also for the distant publics in the time of uncertainty or crisis. And second, vicarious identification can give a sense of purpose, both in the UK case or for the national public, and then also by reinvigorating NATO and giving NATO a new purpose. And then - what is probably specific to the UK - it was a kind of way to revive after the depressive post Brexit atmosphere. To sum it up, all of these functions that vicarious identification has are positive and productive. But are there also inherent risks when there's a blurring of lines between an individual or collective subjects identity to another subject, individual or collective. So, is there also a risk in this mechanism of vicarious identification?

CB: Yes, yes, certainly. At the end of the day, vicarious relationships are always appropriative, and therefore they're always potentially unstable and some vicarious relationships may be more unstable than others. I think there are three potential dangers or limitations in vicarious relationships. . I think there are three potential dangers or limitations in vicarious relationships. I think there are three potential dangers or limitations in vicarious relationships. One would be that the target of vicarious identification, gains a certain amount of, we would suggest, moral power over the subject. An example of this would be the UK's longstanding vicarious identification with the United States in the special relationship, one consequence of which is that the UK is frequently lampooned as being a poodle to Washington, for example. Or you might think about the US's vicarious identification with Israel, which is something we might come back to a bit later as well. Or, Ukraine's vicarious identification of not just the UK, but many Western countries and their populations with Ukraine also gave Ukraine, and in particular Zelensky, certain cards that he could use in negotiating with those countries. That certainly enables him to mobilize shame and stigmatization dynamics, for example. A second limitation is that vicarious identifications also have to be accepted by a relevant audience. So, you have to be able to establish legitimacy for the claim you are making, that others think that it's somehow reasonable for you to actually manifest this sort of appropriative relationship. (.) So that gets you into the question of what we would term as 'telling rights'. How do you establish these sorts of

relationships? There are different ways in which that can be done. Between parents and their children - which is probably the vicarious relationship most of us would recognize - that happens through a biological relationship. Citizens' relationship with their nations is also one that tends to be broadly accepted. But you can also establish telling rights through establishing a shared historical context, through joint cultural practices, through establishing a form of shared kinship, for example. A second limitation is that vicarious identifications also have to be accepted by a relevant audience. So, you have to be able to establish legitimacy for the claim you are making, that others think that it's somehow reasonable for you to actually manifest this sort of appropriative relationship. (.) So that gets you into the question of what we would term as 'telling rights'. How do you establish these sorts of relationships? There are different ways in which that can be done. Between parents and their children - which is probably the vicarious relationship most of us would recognize - that happens through a biological relationship. Citizens' relationship with their nations is also one that tends to be broadly accepted. But you can also establish telling rights through establishing a shared historical context, through joint cultural practices, through establishing a form of shared kinship, for example. If you fail in some of these things, you might be accused of cultural appropriation and you might end up being shamed. And a third limitation is that what happens when the target of vicarious identification starts behaving in ways that might actually become a bit problematic for the self. So, in the context of vicarious relationships or investments with Ukraine: what happens when some of the humor shifts from being about Ukrainian farmers stealing tanks - which is very hilarious - to humor in the form of war crimes? So, we had dead Russian soldiers being laid out in a 'Z' formation, for example, the insignia of the Russian invasion, or there were TikToks that were widely spread of Ukrainians taking phones from dead Russian soldiers and phoning up their mothers, wives and

and families and essentially laughing at them, for example. At that point, vicarious identification becomes somewhat more uncomfortable, and you can become tarnished.

EJ: I would like to briefly summarize your explanation to see if I got it correctly. So, what I learned is first that this mechanism of vicarious identification is something that doesn't happen automatically or easily, and that it's not a process that can be pursued strategically or instrumentally. Probably there are some actors that deliberately try to raise support for Ukraine or push towards a reinvigoration of NATO, but that these telling rights get accepted, that the audience really gets invested in this identification process is not something that you can absolutely control or fabricate. And I think this also links to the last aspect you mentioned, that it can also not be easily reversed in the case that the object of identification becomes problematic. And then with regard to the risk, I noticed something that you only mentioned in passing: another downside of this process is that it is also a patronizing act. And that's also something that we can understand better when remembering your analogy to parental relationships, where it is indeed a hierarchical paternalistic relationship in which someone projects some responsibilities, characteristics, or expectations onto someone else. And in turn, the risk for the subject - the collective or individual - that identifies with someone else is that this makes you vulnerable to being exploited by or being dependent on this object of identification. So, did I get the dynamics of this relationship correctly? Or do you want to clarify something?

CB: I would just clarify that it's not always clear which way the power relationship goes in vicarious relationships. So, I think that's more a contextual type of question. It's worth thinking about when are such relationships tempting? And - following other literature on this - we would argue that they're more likely to be tempting in situations in which the subject is no longer, for whatever reason, quite able to live up to the claims that it makes about itself. Now, that might be because they have a lack of opportunity to do so. For instance, if you declare yourself the defender of the free world, but you don't seem to have the opportunities to defend the free world, but somebody else looks like they might be, then you

might carelessly invest in them. So, there might be a question of opportunity. There might be a question of a lack of capabilities. In the British context we are at this very moment just going through a new sort of defense review and the UK government consistently portrays itself as being a major defender of the free world, but its military capabilities don't look even remotely like it can do that. It's reliant on, and has historically been reliant on, vicariously appropriating and joining alongside US military ventures. And that's something that stands for many European states, for example. So, you might not have the capability, you might also not have the will, but somebody else might have the will.

EJ: I would like to take up the question what is tempting about vicarious identification, because what I'm still a bit lacking is: what is the role of humor in such processes of vicarious identification? In fact, that's the topic that we started out with, and I still don't get it exactly into the picture of this process.

JB: There's a dynamic I'd like to clarify here, which is the virality of humor, the bottom up aspects of humor, the fact that it resonates, the fact that there were identifications with the irony of Ukraine. To some extent this was a popular and everyday formation. But then there was a temptation on the part of elites and state leaders to instrumentalize that to the larger point. Just to echo what Chris was saying: vicarious identification is a relationship. And just as

“the UK has identified with Ukraine through humor, Ukraine has also promoted this vicarious identification through humor.”

There's a very famous example of this: there was a Russian warship that was attempting to take Snake Island and that was engaging in radio communications with the Ukrainians who were on the island.

EJ: It was in February 2022.

JB: And the communication was very clear that you're in a lot of trouble and you need to surrender or else you're going to die or words to that effect. And very famously and passionately and with complete irreverence, the Ukrainians said: 'The last communication was: Russian warship, go fuck yourself.' And in that moment, people were unsure if the people died, if that was their last ever words. And it was considered to be this very kind of important moment of defiance online. And a lot of people invested in this phrase 'Russian warship, go fuck yourself' because that's the wartime spirit that was really shining through like bravery in the face of death. And I think a lot of British people identified with that as well. What was interesting about that is it became very attractive to both the UK, but particularly to Ukraine, that this was a symbol, a symbol of defiance, of bravery, of humor in face of dread. (...) And the Ukrainian government commissioned an artist to represent this moment in a stamp. (...)

And it was a kind of commemorative stamp 'Russian warship, go fuck yourself', and presented it to the defense secretary in the UK at the time, Ben Wallace. And he was very proud and he wore T-shirts that said 'Russian warship, go fuck yourself'. And everyone was starting to then turn this into an instrumental thing like this was part of our formal identification. And at that point, the British Maritime Museum actually put these original commemorative prints into their museum as the history of British maritime history. That our military history is now identified with Ukrainian history. And this is a part of us. And so, albeit there are instabilities in the identification between the UK and Ukraine, I would say one thing that's really stood the test of time is: it's done a job for Britain. Britain is happy with itself on this issue. There are very few subjects where the Conservative Party and the Labour Party will totally agree. And Ukraine is basically one of them. This is a thing where the British are basically aligned. The cause of Ukraine is just. There might be tension. So, at some stage, we're very happy with Ukrainian immigrants. At a certain stage, we're like 'OK, but when does this end now?' At some stage, we're very excited about the Eurovision Song Contest.



Image: Postage stamp «Russian warship, go...! Glory to Ukraine!»
2022 [Wikimedia Commons](#), Public Domain

And at certain points, we're like 'OK, but could we win it once maybe?' And so forth. But the dynamic of vicarious identification relationship is that both self and other get something out of it.

EJ: I think now I have just realized how incredible this vicarious identification can work or at least worked in this case. We know that wars are nation forging operations. So even if there has been polarization or friction, if a country is attacked or has to defend itself, then people tend to rally around the flag. And Ukraine is certainly a prime example for this: we get the impression that the whole nation stands up and is ready. Probably, it's not as homogeneous as it seems, but there is definitely a strong standing together, an invigoration of national sense and identity and support for the nation. And what you just described makes the impression that - through this process of vicarious identification - it has even the same effect in Britain. So there has been so much friction between the Brexiteers and the Remainers. But this is now one thing where we could all unite, where we could be on the same page. So, as if it was like a rallying around the flag moment for the UK society as well. Did I get that right? If yes, I find this really, really amazing.

CB: Absolutely. And then humor then also plays part of the role in disciplining around that as well. The stigmatization of anyone who would want to complicate the narrative in any way, start asking questions about the causes or direction of conflict, the level of support and so on. Humor has also functioned in that way.

JB: Yeah. They're tinfoil hats or Putin apologists.

EJ: I think we have now got a really good understanding of what you mean by saying that the war in Ukraine was fun for the UK. What you mean is this concept of vicarious identification and the kind of positive political effects that it had for the British self-identity and self-esteem and security. But you still owe us an answer to the question, why the war in Gaza is not as much fun. Does this mean that the process of vicarious identification doesn't work there? Or what is the reason?

What is the difference here to the war in Ukraine?

CB: Let me give a first answer and then James might say a bit more about the humor side of it. So, it's not that vicarious identification hasn't been present, but it is much more contested. So, one of the intriguing differences between Ukraine and Israel/Gaza would be that - truth be told - Ukraine was a blank slate for most British people. People didn't know anything about Ukraine. And also, Ukraine was kind of over there. There was no real sense in the UK that this might come here. That obviously felt very different if you're in the Baltic states or Poland. So that made that move probably easier. Of course, British people are much more aware of - even if they don't know it well - histories in the Middle East to some degree. And they will be aware that, Britain has played a role in the history of Israel/Palestine. And it's not necessarily a comfortable role. It's certainly a complicating role. So, it's harder to tell just black and white stories. But the point about saying it's much more contested is: Over Ukraine, the state itself and public institutions almost immediately jumped onto vicarious identification with Ukraine or initial identification becoming vicarious identification, which we saw through the statements of different organizations, the lighting up of public buildings in Ukrainian colors like Wembley Stadium, for example. That never happened after October 7th in Israel. And that became a point of contestation for Israel with the UK. So, the state and public institutions like universities have stayed clear of adopting a particular position in general, even if the state has been providing military support to Israel. This hasn't been about vicarious identification within society, of course. There are groups that have been vicariously identifying on different sides. And that, of course, potentially brings Israel/Gaza back home in a much more contested way.

JB: It's an interesting comparison because we feel like Ukraine says quite a lot about the UK. And if we were to think about the UK and probably the US, the identification with Israel and Palestine and its

contested nature also says quite a lot about the UK and the US. And it says that we're really unsure. We really don't know how to support those things we value – “human rights, democracy, solid sympathy with vulnerability, etc., etc. Because the case is - I don't know if this is a controversial thing to say - the case is complex and very difficult and awful and tragic. And it's quite hard to decipher the politics of it. So, we start with that idea, that provocative idea that it's not as much fun. But then humor is not absent. (...) And that's really interesting for us to trace the lines of what humor does, because - again, in terms of the comparison - there's arguably a similar amount, if not more, military support by the US and UK for Israel in its practices in Gaza.

EJ: Compared to Ukraine.

JB: Yeah. But there isn't a similar level of state-declared vicarious identification with the cause. There was at the start, Joe Biden referred to it as fifteen 'Nine-elevens'. So, expressing the trauma of the original October the 7th actions in terms of 9/11, a very American tragedy. In the UK, the British government began lighting up the houses of Parliament and Number 10 in Downing Street[5] in the colors of Israel to express solidarity. But then very quickly started to tone it down. And so, what we've seen, I think, is a kind of a general sense that, yes, the vicarious identification is contested. There are a lot of people who express sympathy with October the 7th, but there are a lot of people that think the cause of Palestine is more complicated and longer than simply October the 7th. So, what we've seen instead is a kind of a disciplinary humor where the identification with the cause of Palestinians is largely recognized as legitimate. But identification with Hamas has been regularly questioned and derided as a potential excess of this vicarious identification. So, the humor we're interested in has been the ridicule of these kind of excessive moments of identification with Palestinians. You might remember some of the tweets by academics at the time that said, what did you think decolonization was about?

Vibes, papers, essays, losers. You might remember the Black Lives Matter tweeted out and said it supported Palestine and used an effigy of a paraglider. And in fact, the paraglider which was used to fly into Israel on October 7th has been something of a symbol for pro-Palestine solidarities. And we would defer to our colleague Helle Malmvig who has been looking at the various ways in which humor has been used to simplify the politics, to show solidarity with a kind of an asymmetric fight, a resistance fight where you have to use tools like hang gliders and so forth. So, if you think of the example of the US: historically, the US has had a strong identification with Israel because it's like a heroic state for the US. The US, which would lose wars like Vietnam, could always look to Israel and see a country that would win its wars. There was an identification with the cause of Jewish Israelis in relation to Zionism and responses to the Holocaust. But that's somewhat of a generational thing. And this generation is exposed to things like social media, where they see kind of regular acts of violence in Gaza. And the humor that has evolved around this has been along those lines to almost police pro-Palestinian vicarious identification through ridicule, that you are being childish, you are seeking to cosplay as Gazans yourself. There was a number of jokes during the occupation of Columbia University[6] that suggested that the students were essentially performance or theater studies students who were dressing up and cosplaying as refugees themselves and they were asking for humanitarian aid and so forth. So, there's this kind of ridicule and of putting down these groups. Of course, Joe Biden referred to the protesters as un-American. And within this, we would say there are certainly some reactionary elements. So, it's interesting that the far right, people like Tommy Robinson, have got involved with one of the classic double standards or what's a boundary-type argument where

[5] 10 Downing Street in London is the official residence and office of the British Prime Minister.

[6] Students of Columbia University in New York City – and of other US universities - set up an encampment to show their solidarity with Palestinians and push their universities to divest from companies with business ties to the Israeli government.

they've ridiculed the notion of queer solidarity with Palestine. And the ridicule is along the lines: it's great that queers feel sympathy for Palestinians, but if you were queer and living in Palestine, you would have a much harder life because Hamas has very strict policies on sexuality and so forth. So, this is a kind of reactionary form of humor that is obviously playing to far right motifs. But we're also interested in the very fun elements of it and the elements which expose some of the ontological security dynamics within the West. For instance, a comedian called Tim Dillon said that it is sort of amazing how exciting these moments are, how carnivalesque they are. And he played around with the idea of these woke students identifying with Iran. And he played on queers for Palestine with 'trans for Iran' and had this notion of a huge cultural uplift in favor of Iran. And it was exaggerated and silly and fun, but it was interesting that two or three weeks later, the Ayatollah Khamenei actually was tweeting his support and solidarity with the students in Colombia and offering that they could go to Iran and they could study for free in Iranian universities. These were early ideas that we're trying to work out. But it's interesting for us that humor has been an alternative way to discipline what you're not allowed to talk about or what is not acceptable speech or what you're not allowed to manifest in terms of our values of the West and of human rights. I think, Chris, you were talking a little bit about Hillary Clinton on this topic.

CB: Yeah. So, Hillary Clinton was on TV about the situation. She basically took the line that pro-Palestinian protesters are young, immature and lack any understanding of history. Some of the responses [to this interview] were along the lines that 'I don't need much of an understanding of history necessarily to see ethnic cleansing or genocide taking place before me'. But there are some very interesting responses that take us back to where we started: the question what humor is doing to international or global politics, and where we emphasized that the role of social media is quite significant in this respect. Because what came out in some of the responses to Hillary Clinton was the fact that different generations - picking up on James's point - are seeing a very different mediated conflict nowadays. So, Hillary Clinton

and the boomers, if you put it that way, they were seeing the conflict as mediated by [traditional] media, whereas it was pointed out by a couple of regional specialists that the younger generation, they were reading the books, but they were also seeing all of the videos on social media of dead babies. And therefore, they have a very different mediation of the war. Due to that, the way in which vicarious identification is taking place, is perhaps shifting as well. Historically, US Western vicarious identification with Israel has been more driven by cultural, civilizational types of dynamics. But what you're seeing here is instead a shift away from the cultural to the more ideological. There is a lot of mockery about 'how is it that LGBT people could be standing with Hamas?'. What's getting missed there is a more underlying foundational sense that this is part of a more general social justice move around standing for the marginalized and shared histories of oppression.

EJ: I am happy that we have now also talked about the different forms that humor can take ranging from dark, aggressive to elating, positive, energizing forms of humor. And we have also got a good understanding of these mechanisms of vicarious identification in which humor plays a role but is not the only element that makes this process work. This is so intriguing that I could go on with this conversation, but we must come to an end at some time. And I think you made a really, really impressive case for what a focus on humor can reveal both about national politics, but also about international politics. So, I can just say, thank you very much for this conversation. This was real fun. This was a really, really enriching conversation. Thank you so much for taking the time today.

CB/JB: Thank you.

From Soldiering to Humanitarianism

WAR VETERANS SEEKING THRILL, PURPOSE AND ATONEMENT IN UKRAINE BY HEIDI MOGSTAD

At the beginning of April 2022, about six months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Antonio De Lauri and I travelled with a documentary team to Medyka, the busiest border crossing between Poland and Ukraine. Our purpose was to speak with some of the many "ordinary" citizens we had learned were travelling to the new war theatre in Europe to join the Ukrainian Foreign Legion. What we found was a myriad of actors drawn to the war zone — or at least to what De Genova (2013) has described as "the border spectacle."

Much like Lesbos during the so-called "refugee crisis," the Ukrainian-Polish border attracted people with a wide range of motivations and agendas. We saw journalists, celebrities, religious organizations, and numerous humanitarian volunteers, including a group of Chinese dissidents and a young woman handing out "free hugs" and Kinder Eggs. While their intentions surely varied, they all seemed to share something with the humanitarian volunteers I interviewed on the Greek border island: a desire to "be there" and witness history unfolding with their own eyes (Mogstad 2023; Papataxiarchis 2016).



Image: by Anders Hereid & Vegard Lund Berghem

Although we stayed in Medyka only a couple of days, it was striking how many war veterans we encountered who said they were going to Ukraine to do humanitarian work. These individuals often expressed a combination of personal, moral and sometimes ideological motivations, blending a thirst for thrill or adventure with a commitment to make a difference. Some veterans also seemed drawn by the possibility of reinventing themselves as entrepreneurs or humanitarians. For instance, a Norwegian war veteran I met emphasized that Ukraine promised both excitement and purpose. Even though he had initially promised his wife not to enter the war zone, he had several times driven SUVs into Kharkiv and other frontline areas to deliver food, medicine, and other supplies. At the time we met him, he was spending a few days at the border recuperating while distributing food and clothes to refugees crossing over. Reflecting on his transition to civilian life after several tours in the Balkans, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, he told me:

“The war does not leave our bodies when we return home from the battlefield. We veterans, we are like ‘spente buer’ (tight bows). We need to go somewhere to release our tensions.”

Yet he also stressed that he found great meaning in doing humanitarian work in Ukraine, contrasting this with the increasingly meaningless “adventure” in Afghanistan (see Mogstad 2024).

At one of the humanitarian tents by the border, we also met a Dutch veteran named “Dirk.” Dirk had served several tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, but now emphasized that he was here to do humanitarian work. Before leaving for Poland, he had bought a large old bus, refurbished it, and painted it white. The next day, he and another veteran planned to drive to Kyiv to deliver medicine and food, and to bring back as many elderly people, women and children as they could fit on board. When we asked Dirk why he was doing this, he explained that he had the necessary skills and experience to navigate a war zone. Reflecting on his shift from soldiering to humanitarianism, he also said that he “wanted to share love rather than aggression”.

While some described themselves as adrenaline junkies or adventure-seekers, many of the same individuals also framed their humanitarian work in Ukraine as a way to heal from traumatizing experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some even spoke of their transition from soldiering to humanitarianism as a way to “atone” for what they had done, to “make amends,” or to regain agency and control of their actions outside the disciplinary structures of the military.



Image: by Anders Hereid & Vegard Lund Bergheim

However, it is important to note that such atonement does not necessarily take the form of humanitarian or non-violent action; it may also involve participating in the war as soldiers. A Dutch scholar I later spoke with told me he had met several veterans who had served with the UN during the Srebrenica massacre. The 1995 genocide, perpetrated by the Bosnian Serb army, resulted in the killing of more than 8,000 men and boys, the displacement of thousands, and the destruction of entire communities in Srebrenica—designated a “safe area” by the UN Security Council. A small, lightly armed unit of Dutch peacekeepers under the UN flag had been unable to resist the far larger Bosnian Serb force that overran the town. Haunted by their experience as “bystanders” to the massacre, some of these veterans now felt compelled to go to Ukraine in order to “compensate” for their past inaction.

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Red Scarf and other Stories

BY IVA JELUŠIĆ

It's been a year since I finished working on the WarFun project. Many details I found at least interesting — and often important — for understanding the nature of fun in war from an affective perspective, did not make it into the final articles. Some found their place in the visual archive, others remained unrecorded. More importantly, while writing texts that adhered to the conventions of academic discourse, I often felt that war — and by extension, fun in war — was almost impossible to fully express in that framework. Many primary sources, particularly ego documents, suggested that war was a truly carnivalesque experience: an organism where established customs collapse, hierarchies are inverted, and contradictory emotions — joy, terror, absurdity, desire — coexist in ways that feel unreal and vividly present. Stories and images that stayed with me were

not those that are analytically neat, but those that felt unsettling and painful as well as funny or oddly light. They made me wonder whether another kind of storytelling — more fragmented, affective, and subjective — might get closer to what war can feel like. So now — without revisiting the research I read, but with a short list of sources in the end — I am writing a brief account inspired by the stories I read. As I will shortly discover, words continue to fall short. But I am still sharing the outcome.



Image: Sketchify via Canva.com

Once upon a time lived a man who had parents, siblings, nephews, the whole shebang. Then he didn't have them anymore. Once upon a time he also had friends. Then some of them shot at him. And some he carried under their fire. Then came a time when he had to make a difficult decision, and his was to join the resistance. His new friends and family taught him to sneak and hide and all but disappear into the city's nooks and crannies. Being what amounts to a wartime undercover agent was by far the hardest gig a person could have and, in an improbably short time, he couldn't even count the number of times he ran from police officers and their gunshots. Despite all the effort, his identity became known to the authorities in a matter of weeks, so he was dispatched into the woods in an attempt to improve his life expectancy...

You've probably guessed by now — that man was me. Or maybe just one version of me, from that time. What I'm trying to say is that the war changed my life. It became infinitely worse, of course. And, at times, it also... surprised me. For instance. I have never enjoyed food as much as I did then. Resorting to eating tree bark and baked opanci[1], as I did on a few occasions, had the ability to make the first piece of food — whether it was bread and kajmak[2], fried egg, or plain baked potato, especially if there was salt — an intoxicating experience. The people I shared those meals with still emanate some of the same aura; to this day they smell of baking and feel like childlike relief. Except the memory of the girl with a scarf embroidered with yellow and white flowers. While I was recovering in a hospital in the mountains, she regularly brought corn bread to the sick and wounded. Her hands were bruised from work actions aimed at

demolishing roads — those few that we had back then — and she had the most beautiful singing voice I had ever heard. When she would start a song, I always joined although I cannot sing to save my life. I had never sung so much as I did during those weeks in that hospital. Whenever I think of her, I remember sitting in front of the hospital, enjoying the late spring sun, and singing.

[1] Traditional peasant shoes worn in SE Europe.

[2] Creamy dairy food made from milk of cows, sheep, or goats in some Balkan countries, Middle East and Central Asia.

When I was discharged from the hospital, she gave me that red scarf. It's faded a bit now, y'see, and the flowers aren't all there anymore, but I still have it. I, on the other hand, gave her a copy of the unit newspaper in which one of my poems was published. Pathetic, I know. And I asked her if she would wait for me. Man, her smile just then. Maybe the question made up for the newspapers a little. Of course, the infinitely worse part and those surprising aspects of my new life then got some new flavors. Partially because she said she would. Partially because we never got the chance to meet in the after. Instead, we met in prison. Well, not exactly met, but for a brief moment, I think, we laid eyes on each other.

The day I was captured we fought this great big battle. The whole plan came down to this: surprise the enemy when and where he does not expect us. And we did. At first light we stormed out of our cover. We ran as fast as our legs carried us. Many shouted. And cheered, and screamed, and screeched. We charged like in the movies about the wars of the past. Like the savages from those movies, of course. It was exhilarating. The most exciting part was getting so close to the enemy soldiers and seeing the confusion on their faces. To see that they can be afraid too. And to shoot at will, which we were almost never allowed to do.

It seemed to me that we cut down more enemy soldiers in that first charge than in the entire month of skirmishes before that. I shot at everything that moved in front of me and watched guys with wide eyes tumble down. Their eyes made me think of cartoons I watched as a kid and I wanted to laugh. I wondered if it was my bullets that extinguished light in their eyes and I wanted to cry. I guess war is the same for all the poor of the world. I continued to run and shoot and run and shoot and run and shoot until there was nowhere to run to.

As luck would have it, my unit broke away from the main body of our forces and fell into a trap. On account of a disgruntled enemy soldier and the butt of his rifle, I spent the next hours unconscious and, together with a bunch of other guys, woke up in one of those makeshift prisons – converted institutional buildings of the previous government – that the countryside abounded in at this time. It was dank and, despite some broken windows, it smelled of piss. No surprises there. A hammer was pounding away in my head, courtesy of the aforementioned šmajser[3]. Or something similar. Beyond knowing that German weapons were good and Italian were crap, I did not really care to learn more about them. And my stomach felt like it was filled with molten lava. I've been to prison before, y'know. And I've heard that the treatment in the royal prisons was downright lenient compared to the treatment that prisoners experienced now. I felt like vomiting even before I mustered the strength to open my eyes. Maybe due to concussion, maybe due to fear. Hard to tell.

I could make out the faint murmur of conversation. It was a story I knew well. "There is this book," the speaker was explaining, "The Good Soldier Schweik. In the middle of some battle, Schweik saw a flower. A forget-me-not. It cheered him up. Those wild strawberries cheered us up." It was the guy I barely knew, a Newcomer to our unit, that I ate strawberries with while we waited for an air raid to pass. They felt tastier because there were only the two of us in that particular hideout and no one could disturb our unexpected little treat. We ate wild strawberries and peered at the sky while he told me about Schweik and I laughed. I must have smiled while listening to the retelling as well. Someone in the group noticed I was awake and commotion arose. For a moment there, I felt like it was good to be alive. It did not last, though.

I soon learned that the interrogations had already begun that very first night. While I was still out, several were taken away. A few hours later, fewer came back, all bloody and disoriented. Now, when the daylight was starting to lose its intensity again and the fear started seeping in, the Newcomer treated the group to a story about strawberries. Considering that we didn't get anything to eat that day, it was most fitting. I always felt better after talking about food. Imaginary food, I dare say, was better than no food at all. Others must have felt the same way, as several more volunteered their wartime adventures with food. Even our normally quiet procurement officer all of a sudden felt more familiar when he detailed every little thing he liked about his wife's cooking and how many times our cook got the same food completely wrong.

When another group was taken away from our cell for the night, the liveliness simply drained from the conversation. We sat on the floor and beds, rolled thin cigarettes and smoked while

[3] The MP40 (Maschinenpistole 40) submachine gun developed in Nazi Germany and extensively used during World War II.

trading information: who had managed to exchange a few words with the guards, who else was here, what the connections were with the outside. Finally, we slept.

The slightest sounds disturbed us and we were easily awakened by the keys unlocking the door, followed by the blind stumbling of two now barefoot comrades. Were they foot whipped or had their nails been pulled out, I wondered? What happened to the ones who did not come back? Someone said that they were harnessed to a horse-drawn carriage because their interrogators fancied a walk around the prison. Could that be true? Most of all, I was troubled by how I would get through it when my time comes. Will I be able to keep my mouth shut?

It turned out that the walk to the interrogation cell was the hardest part. On the way there, we passed several closed doors and one open one. By the entrance, I clearly remember, stood a balding monkey. Smoking and grinning, he asked me if I plan to be as stubborn as her. "We've been working on her for days now," he said. "We're on the verge of breaking that little bitch," he spat out at the end. Inside, I could see a young girl hanging upside down. Her summer dress was crumpled around her waist, revealing her legs, all black and blue from the beatings she endured. I didn't really want to look at her face, but my gaze slid down on its own. Under the grimace — I thought she must be dead already — I saw the face of the girl who used to carry food in a red scarf, inspired me to sing and make a fool of myself in front of my comrades, and made me wish this war would end sooner. For a moment it seemed to me that our eyes had met.

Who knows what would have happened – would I have tried to help her, haha, can you imagine what a stupid move that would have been – if that monkey hadn't tripped me. I stumbled and, since my hands were tied, I plunged nose first into the concrete. Men around me, not unlike chimpanzees, started to snigger. For them, a new round of basement merrymaking was about to begin. Later, when someone told me how short the interrogation had lasted, I didn't know how to explain that I had lived my entire life in those few hours. However, it turned out I needn't have worried about giving away any information. They kept asking about the plans of the Supreme Headquarters. Even if I had wanted to – and you bet I did – I couldn't share anything about them as I simply didn't know anything. But the pain kept coming in folds, wrapping me so tightly I could barely breathe. I tried to remember myself outside that cell. I tried to remember her. I tried to pray to the God I didn't believe in that they wouldn't put us in a room together. I would have told them everything I ever knew, even if they did not ask, if it meant that no one would touch her.

I think I would have tried to hug her. After an entire lifetime, back in our cell, the only thing that could calm the jitters was thinking about how a hug would feel. I couldn't sleep. I shuddered thinking what had happened to her. What would happen to her. At dawn I began to sing. As quietly as I possibly could, I sang all the songs we sang in the hospital.

Propaganda songs, war songs, marching songs, songs about death and songs about love. I sang all the songs I knew, and when there were no songs left, I started over. Behind my closed eyes, I sat in front of the hospital, she sat next to me, we sang and stole glances at each other like two kids in a schoolyard. In the cell, Newcomer accompanied me in a whisper, the other comrades as well, sometimes just one or two, sometimes all of them. Another night was creeping in.



Image: Partizanska bolnica u selu Trnavcu 1941
Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

It turned out that she had been here for weeks. They caught her with leaflets that she had been distributing in the surrounding villages. She would not answer their questions, and the more she kept quiet, the more they beat her. It was only a matter of time, the opinion prevailed, before she would die. "That's what happens when you don't know your place," one guy sighed.

"Those god damned skirts again," he groaned whenever our female comrades were mentioned. His indignation only grew stronger when we started calling him Skirt. Which is, as you've probably guessed, exactly why we still call him that. Of course, he still disapproves it and so the tease continues. Only without the vitriol. His sister, let me employ those pesky air quotes now, knew her place. But when they could not reach Skirt, they resorted to punishing her. Since then, the nickname Skirt was just a reminder of a person he had once been.

I must say, Skirt's indignation was an exception in prison. Out in the woods... it was easy. Easy to reproach girls and women who joined the resistance instead of staying home, even if that home did not exist anymore. Easy to mock their weakness or naiveté. Easy to get involved too, although it was forbidden. Especially because it was forbidden, maybe. It made sex an undercover operation, and few could resist the temptation. But here in prison, every nasty detail was known. The guards told stories that sounded outrageous, and the interrogators worked to live up to them, especially in sessions when they would choose to beat men and women, brothers and sisters, lovers, together. So, I decided to keep my mouth shut. And couldn't. In the end, I asked one of the friendly guards to send her a message. I don't know if it ever reached her.

I would have more easily gotten over her not waiting for me.

No one had kind words for the women who didn't wait. Jokes about them came effortlessly, cruel. Like, y'know, they should pay their dues. Every now and again Skirt, for instance, would come up with a woman he judged for belonging to this group and there was always someone else who would take the bait. Just passing time, they would play with the possibilities of how should the dues be paid. Eventually, some would leave, to jerk off or to find someone willing to do it for them, others would get bored and move to a new subject.

But now I knew. I would have way more easily gotten over her not waiting for me.

Hey, don't worry, the death of my wartime sweetheart didn't ruin me. I could love again and have a beautiful family, do all the things one should do. Except for singing, I gave up singing after that day in prison. I left that part of me to my wartime sweetheart. Even when the war drew to a close and victory came and everyone seemed to sing, I remained silent. Still, I came out on the other side in much better shape than many of my comrades. Y'see, only a part of me didn't return from the war, but some remained there for the rest of their lives. And these days, if anyone tries to encourage me to sing, I just pretend not to hear them. I'd rather be rude than misunderstood. Only Newcomer never asks. Although I guess he is no longer a newcomer, right. For a long time now, he is more like my brother. Anyway, he knows better. He just orders another round and together with our comrades, both living and dead, we recount wartime adventures and toast to having survived yet another night.

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Jacques Prévert's Anti-war Poetry

BY EVA JOHAIS

Jacques Prévert Paroles

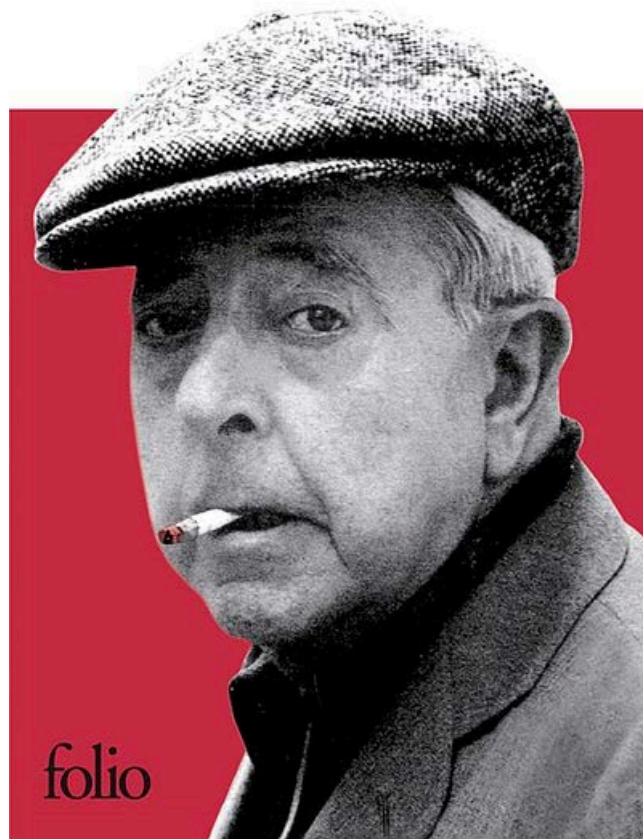


Image: Amour des Lettres, [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC0

Jacques Prévert was a French poet and screenwriter (4 February 1900 – 11 April 1977). He quit school once he had completed his primary education at the age of fifteen to work in a major department store in Paris and was conscripted for military service during the First World War. Throughout his life, he combined artistic and political work: Prévert participated actively in the Surrealist movement and in an agitprop theater company that established a cinema in support of the left-wing alliance Front populaire [Popular Front] that shortly governed the French Republic from 1936 to 1938. His oeuvre therefore features the Surrealist's unconventional and phantasmagoric elements but also conveys sharp social criticism. While clearly supportive of leftist politics, it is the most conspicuous feature of his political stance that Prévert stayed a radical antimilitarist and peace activist thereby provoking accusations both from the political right and left.

Complainte Du Fusillé

The poem is an account of an execution by a firing squad that bespeaks the arbitrariness of military violence and the disregard for the value of human life.

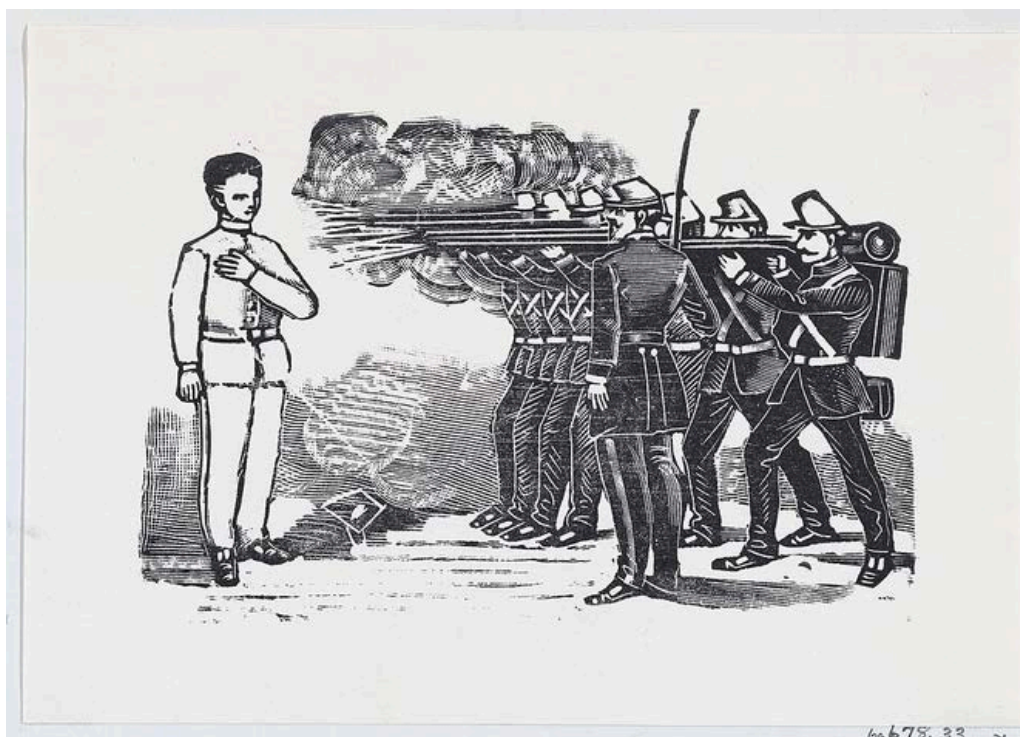


Image: José Guadalupe Posada, [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Complainte du fusillé

Ils m'ont tiré au mauvais sort
par pitié
J'étais mauvaise cible
le ciel était si bleu
Ils ont levé les yeux
en invoquant leur dieu
Et celui qui s'est approché
seul
sans se hâter
tout comme eux
un petit peu a tiré à côté
à côté du dernier ressort
à la grâce des morts
à la grâce de dieu.
Ils m'ont tiré au mauvais sort
par les pieds
et m'ont jeté dans la charrette des morts
des morts tirés des rangs
des rangs de leur vivant
numéroté
leur vivant hostile à la mort
Et je suis là près d'eux
vivant encore un peu
tuant le temps de mon mal
tuant le temps de mon mieux.

(Jacques Prévert, *Fatras*, 1966)

Elegy of the Shot One

They dragged me into bad fate
out of pity
I was a bad target
the sky was so blue
They looked up
invoking their god
And the one who approached
alone
without haste
just like them
has missed a little bit
missed the last resort
by the grace of the dead
by the grace of God.
They dragged me into bad fate
by the feet
and threw me in the cart of the dead
drawn from the ranks
the ranks of their living
numbered
their living hostile to death
And I am there with them
still a little alive
killing the time of my pain
killing the time the best I can.

(Translation by Claudia & Eva Johais)

Le discours sur la paix

The poem criticizes the hypocrisy of statesmen's way of talking that is supposed to obscure the economic interests behind military ventures.



Image: Yalta Conference 1945, Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt. [Wikimedia Commons](#), Public Domain

Le discours sur la paix

Vers la fin d'un discours extrêmement
important
le grand homme d'État trébuchant
sur une belle phrase creuse
tombe dedans
et désesparé la bouche grande ouverte
haletant
montre les dents
et la carie dentaire
de ses pacifiques raisonnements
met à vif le nerf de la guerre
la délicate question d'argent.

(Jacques Prévert, *Paroles*, 1946)

Peace talk

By the end of an extremely important
speech
the great statesman stumbling
upon a nice empty phrase
falls into it
and helpless with open mouth
panting
shows the teeth
and the dental caries
of his peaceful reasonings
exposes the nerve of the war
the delicate question of money.

(Translation by Claudia & Eva Johais)



THE WARFUN PROJECT

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